

Equipment

Bonding Bridge
Toughness Ring
Life Ring

MAPLE'S STATS

8

MP 2022

YUUMIKAN

Illustration by KOIN

Skills

Fortress / A
Indomitable
Hydra Ea
ant K
se
ize
s Th
Crystalliza

Bofuri

★ I Don't ★
Want to Get
Hurt, so I'll
Max Out My
Defense.

Welcome to
NewWorld Online

Equipment

New Moon: Hydra



8

Illustration by **KOIN**



Bofuri
★ I Don't ★
Want to Get
Hurt, so I'll
Max Out My
Defense.

Welcome to
NewWorld Online

New Moon: Hydra

Bofuri ★ **I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense.** ★

MAPLE

Maple's STATS

Lv58
HP 200/200
MP 22/22
[STR 0]
[VIT 14580]
[AGI 0]
[DEX 0]
[INT 0]

Welcome
New World
Online





Maple had angel wings on her back, gun barrels bristling from every inch of her, and monsters on each side plus her left arm transformed into five tentacles spewing black mist.

Atop the giant tree

“Evolved? Oh.
They can acquire
new skills now.”

“How you’ve
grown! Eh-heh-heh,
this is so nice.”



In the seventh stratum ruins



Skills

Shield Attack / Sidestep / Deflect / Meditation / Taunt / Inspire
Heavy Body / HP Boost (S) / MP Boost (S) / Green's Grace
Great Shield Mastery VI / Cover Move IV / Cover / Pierce Guard
Counter / Quick Change / Absolute Defense / Moral Turpitude
Giant Killing / Hydra Eater / Bomb Eater / Sheep Eater
Indomitable Guardian / Psychokinesis / Fortress
Martyr's Devotion / Machine God / Bug Urn Curse / Zone Freeze
Pandemonium I / Heaven's Throne / Nether Nexus
Crystallization / Cataclysmic Eruption / Unbreakable Shield

MAPLE'S STATS

Maple

Lv58 HP 200/200 MP 100/100
[STR 0] [VIT 145] [DEF 100]
[AGI 0] [DEX 0] [LUK 0]

Bofuri
★ I Don't ★
Want to Get
Hurt, so I'll
⑧ Max Out My
Defense.

YUUMIKAN

Illustration by **KOIN**

YEN
ON
NEW YORK

Welcome to
NewWorld Online.

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Bofuri: I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense., Vol. 8
YUUMIKAN

Translation by Andrew Cunningham • Cover art by Koin

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ITAINO WA IYA NANODE BOGYORYOKU NI KYOKUFURI SHITAITO
OMOIMASU. Vol. 8

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✦ Afterword



0850 1048 4870 7463

NewWorld Online Status



NAME **Maple** II Maple LV **58**
HP 200/200 MP 22/22

STATUS

STR 000 VIT 14580 AGI 000 DEX 000 INT 000

EQUIPMENT

New Moon: Hydra Night's Facsimile: Devour Bonding Bridge
Black Rose Armor: Saturating Chaos Toughness Ring Life Ring

SKILLS

Shield Attack Sidestep Deflect Meditation Taunt Inspire HP Boost (S) MP Boost (S) Heavy Body
Green's Grace Great Shield Mastery VI Cover Move IV Cover Pierce Guard Counter Quick Change
Absolute Defense Moral Turpitude Sheep Eater Hydra Eater Bomb Eater Indomitable Guardian
Giant Killing Psychokinesis Fortress Martyr's Devotion Machine God Bug Urn Curse Zone Freeze
Pandemonium Heaven's Throne Nether Nexus Crystallization Cataclysmic Eruption Unbreakable Shield



6892 1179 8406 8847

NewWorld Online Status



NAME **Sally** II Sally LV **56**
HP 32/32 MP 130/130

STATUS

STR 110 VIT 000 AGI 170 DEX 045 INT 060

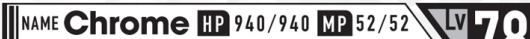
EQUIPMENT

Deep Sea Dagger Seabed Dagger
Surface Scarf: Mirage Oceanic Coat: Oceanic Oceanic Clothes
Charnel Boots: One Step in the Grave Bonding Bridge

SKILLS

Gale Slash Defense Break Inspire Down Attack Power Attack Switch Attack
Combo Blade V Martial Arts VIII Fire Magic III Water Magic III Wind Magic III Earth Magic III
Dark Magic II Light Magic II Strength Boost (L) Combo Boost (L) MP Boost (M) MP Cost Down (M)
MP Recovery Speed Boost (M) Poison Resist (S) Gathering Speed Boost (S) Dagger Mastery X
Magic Mastery III Affliction VIII Presence Block III Presence Detect II Sneaky Steps Leap V
Quick Change Cooking I Fishing Swimming X Diving X Shearing Superspeed
Ancient Ocean Chaser Blade Jack of All Trades Sword Dance Shed Skin Web Spinner VII
Ice Pillar Subzero Domain Nether Nexus Cataclysmic Eruption Water Wielding IV

I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense.
Welcome to NewWorld Online.



STR 135 VIT 180 AGI 040 DEX 030 INT 020

|| Headhunter: Life Eater **|| Wrath Wraith Wall: Soul Syphon**
|| Bloodstained Skull: Soul Eater **|| Bloodstained Bone Armor: Dead or Alive**
|| Robust Ring **|| Impregnable Ring** **|| Defense Ring**

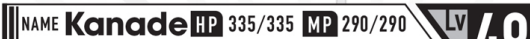
SKILLS	Thrust	Elemental Blade	Shield Attack	Sidestep	Deflect	Great Defense	Taunt	Bulwark
Impregnable Stance	Iron Body	Heavy Body	HP Boost (L)	HP Recovery	Speed Boost (L)	MP Boost (M)	Cover	
Green's Grace	Great Shield Mastery X	Defense Mastery X	Cover Move X	Pierce Guard	Guard Aura	Counter		
Defensive Formation	Guardian Power	Great Shield Secrets VII	Defense Secrets VI	Stun Resist (L)	Burn Resist (L)			
Paralyze Nullification	Poison Nullification	Sleep Nullification	Freeze Nullification	Mining IV	Gathering VII			
Shearing	Spirit Light	Indomitable Guardian	Battle Healing	Reaper's Mire	Crystallization	Stimulation		



STR 045 VIT 020 AGI 080 DEX 210 INT 080

Blacksmith Hammer X **Alchemist Goggles: Faustian Alchemy**
Alchemist Long Coat: Magic Workshop **Blacksmith Leggings X**
Potion Pouch **Item Pouch** **Black Gloves**

SKILLS Strike Crafting Mastery X Crafting Secrets VIII Enhance Success Rate Boost (L) Cooking X Mining X Gathering Speed Boost (L) Mining Speed Boost (L) Crafting Quantity Boost (M) Crafting Speed Boost (L) Keen Sight Sneaky Steps V Smithing X Swimming VI Horticulture X Synthesizing X Augmentation X Affliction III Gathering X Sewing X Diving VII Shearing Godsmith's Grace X Observer's Eye Attribute Endowment III



STR 015 VIT 010 AGI 075 DEX 050 INT 110

|| Divine Wisdom: Akashic Records || Diamond Newsboy Cap VII
 || Smart Coat VI || Smart Leggings VIII || Smart Boots VI
 || Spade Earrings || Mage Gloves || Holy Ring

SKILLS					
Magic Mastery VIII	MP Boost (M)	MP Cost Down (M)	MP Recovery Speed Boost (L)	Fast Chant	
Magic Boost (M)	Green's Grace	Fire Magic VI	Water Magic IV	Wind Magic VII	Earth Magic V
Dark Magic III	Light Magic VII	Sorcerer's Stacks	Reaper's Mire	Magic Meld	

SKILLS Magic Mastery VIII MP Boost (M) MP Cost Down (M) MP Recovery Speed Boost (L) Fast Chant
 Magic Boost (M) Green's Grace Fire Magic VI Water Magic IV Wind Magic VII Earth Magic V
 Dark Magic III Light Magic VII Sorcerer's Stacks Reaper's Mire Magic Meld



2128 0779 2864 5999

NAME **Kasumi** HP 435/435 MP 70/70 LV **72**

STATUS

STR 205 VIT 080 AGI 090 DEX 030 INT 030

EQUIPMENT

Yukari, the All-Consuming Blight Cherry Blossom Barrette
Cherry Blossom Vestments Edo Purple Hakama Samurai Greaves
Samurai Gauntlets Gold Obi Fastener Cherry Blossom Crest

SKILLS

Gleam Helmsplitter Guard Break Sweep Slice Eye for Attack Inspire Attack Stance
Katana Arts X Cleave Throw Power Aura HP Boost (L) MP Boost (M) Attack Boost (M)
Poison Nullification Paralyze Nullification Stun Resist (L) Sleep Resist (L) Freeze Resist (M)
Burn Resist (L) Longsword Mastery X Katana Mastery X Longsword Secrets V Katana Secrets V
Mining IV Gathering VI Diving V Swimming VI Leap VII Shearing Keen Sight Indomitable
Sword Spirit Dauntless Sinew Superspeed Ever Vigilant Mind's Eye

5415 1894 1080 8803

NAME **Mai** HP 35/35 MP 20/20 LV **44**

STATUS

STR 385 VIT 000 AGI 000 DEX 000 INT 000

EQUIPMENT

Black Annihilhammer VIII Black Doll Dress VIII Black Doll Tights VIII
Black Doll Shoes VIII Little Ribbon Silk Gloves

SKILLS

Double Stamp Double Impact Double Strike Attack Boost (M) Hammer Mastery IX
Throw Farshot Conqueror Annihilator Giant Killing Destroy Mode

5272 0557 2241 2738

NAME **Yui** HP 35/35 MP 20/20 LV **44**

STATUS

STR 385 VIT 000 AGI 000 DEX 000 INT 000

EQUIPMENT

White Annihilhammer VIII White Doll Dress VIII White Doll Tights VIII
White Doll Shoes VIII Little Ribbon Silk Gloves

SKILLS

Double Stamp Double Impact Double Strike Attack Boost (M) Hammer Mastery IX
Throw Farshot Conqueror Annihilator Giant Killing Destroy ModeI Don't Want to Die, But My Defense.
Welcome to NewWorld Online.

Prologue

The eight members of Maple Tree finished conquering the seventh event's tower, trounced the sixth stratum's boss, and reached the new stratum—where players could befriend monsters.

After the previous map's spooky horror vibe, the seventh stratum's windswept grasslands were a nice change of pace. Herbivores freely roamed the plains, and a town was visible in the distance. Scanning the horizon, they spotted volcanoes, snowcapped peaks, and floating islands. Even from here, it was obvious this map overflowed with *variety*.

"Wow! And everyone can make a monster friend here?"

"Apparently. Based on the notes from the admins, the sooner the better."

"There's still a lot we don't know, but once you tame a monster, you've gotta get it leveled up. The faster you get one, the more time you'll have to train it."

As the new map came online, the admins had announced the eighth event. The announcement was light on the details, but having monster friends would clearly be an advantage. Maple and Sally already had monster pets, so they summoned Syrup and Oboro as the guild started the long walk to town.

"Oh, so not *all* the monsters are friendly."

"Yep, they're charging right at us!"

""Let's beat them down!""

It wasn't long before a welcoming party appeared—a stampede of bulls with razor-sharp horns. While everyone braced for combat, Sally and Maple struck first.

"Syrup! Mother Nature!"

"Oboro! Shadow Clone!"

Thick vines grew from the ground at the bulls' feet, binding them. Once their charge was halted, five Sallys came in swinging. The bulls did their best to fight back, flailing with their horns, but not one landed a hit on any of the clones Oboro generated.

"Quintuple Slash!"

Sally used a combo skill to finish them off. As aggressive as they were, these bulls were just ordinary monsters, and she made short work of their HP. After the bulls disappeared in a shower of light, the girls gathered up the drop items and heaped praise on their pets.

"Woo! Nice work, Syrup!"

"Thanks, Oboro."

Two players alone could not have made such short work of that stampede.

They'd had Syrup and Oboro around for a while now, and the members of Maple Tree were used to seeing them fight together—but the prospect of getting their own monsters was definitely tantalizing.

“Seeing that sure does make me want a pet of my own.”

“Yeah. There must be a trick to it. Those bulls didn't seem too friendly...”

“Maybe you need an item?”

“Yeah, looks like it. Let's go see!”

Idle conjecture was getting them nowhere, and the anticipation propelled them forward as they hurried into town.

the Seventh Stratum Defense Build and

Eager to explore the seventh stratum, Maple Tree's members first made a beeline for their guild home to make sure it was activated. This stratum's home was built for taming large monsters and had high ceilings, large rooms—and perches. Even more excited to find new pets, everyone split up to check out the town.

At the center stood a great tree, the branches scraping the sky. Canals crisscrossed the streets, and a web of stone roads led in every direction. Looking up revealed wooden bridges stretching between the branches above, connecting all manner of tree houses.

“Okay! Let's see what's out there!”

Curiosity got the best of Maple, and she ran off. Head swiveling, she followed the road—and soon discovered a major difference from previous towns. Every NPC placed here had *some* kind of monster in tow.

“Wow! Just like me and Syrup!”

Maple talked to a few of them, hit up some shops she found, and brought what she learned back to the guild home.

As she came in through the door, she found the rest of the members waiting, armed with intel of their own.

“Oh, you're all back! What's cooking?”

Maple came darting over, eager to share.

“Welcome back,” Sally said, and she began summarizing what they'd learned so far. “I'm sure you figured this much out, but this stratum is definitely all about taming monsters like Oboro and Syrup.”

“Yup, yup! There's all kinds of ways to make friends!”

“Makes you want to go out exploring right away!”

“Heh-heh, Yui can't wait.”

The information they'd gathered wasn't tied to any specific triggers. Some monsters would bond with you once defeated; others became friendly if you gave them certain items—there were all kinds of ways to tame them.

“Syrup and Oboro hatched from eggs, but is every monster like that?”

“Apparently only some. But they do all require a Bonding Bridge, so I can't tame anything but Oboro.”

“.....?”

“Oh, did you not notice? The Bonding Bridge description was changed when the seventh stratum came online, and you can only own one now.”

And if they could only own one, that meant Maple and Sally were stuck with the rings and pets they already had.

“Oh...well, I’m plenty happy with Syrup!”

“I guess we’ll spend most of our time on this stratum helping everyone else out.”

“Yup! Sounds good!”

“So I guess the guild goal is to get everyone a monster so we can run the eighth event?”

“Absolutely! I love it! Count me in!”

No one had any objections, so they confirmed their immediate plans. Everyone was focused on gearing up for the next event.

And anyone who needed help could turn to the two members who already had pets.

“That’ll make a big difference. A lot of the strongest monsters have ‘defeat them’ as a taming condition, which might be rough for a great shielder.”

“Yeah. I guess we start by doing a quick tour? Just seeing what’s out there.”

On the way in, they’d seen how varied the terrain was here. Everything from steep snowcapped mountains to active volcanoes. And the information they’d gathered suggested there were deep oceans and vast deserts, too. The last few maps all had a unified theme, so clearly the idea was that these disparate environments would house different types of monsters.

“If you know what kind of pet you want, you could try looking for it specifically. I think...I’ll hit up the library first.”

“Wonder if there’s any pets that help with crafting...”

“Let’s find something nice, Mai!”

“Sounds good, Yui.”

Minds on pets yet unknown, everyone headed out, gathering intel on which areas were home to which monsters.



But the seventh stratum had only *just* launched. They were in the game’s newest frontier, so if they wanted the juiciest intel, Maple Tree’s members would need to find it themselves.

“Well? See anything you like?”

Maple had spotted the twins at the bulletin boards.

“Hi, Maple! Um, not yet. We were just thinking about exploring a bit ourselves.”

“Makes sense. I can help! Wherever we go, you’re safe with me.”

“Thanks, that would be great.”

Mai bowed her head, and Yui followed suit. Between Maple’s

Atrocity mode and Syrup rides, they could cover a lot of ground. And Martyr's Devotion would ensure they would never be in any danger.

"Then let's get going! You won't know what you want until you see it for yourselves, after all!"

"“Yep!”"

The three girls set out on a new adventure.

If a monster could be tamed, there would be a special symbol next to their HP bar.

"What was it like when you got Syrup?"

"That was back in the second event. We beat this *really* strong bird boss and found two eggs in its nest. The other one was Oboro!"

"So rare monsters are hidden in crazy places?"

"Based on how Maple found hers, that would make sense."

"Then let's find one!"

Maple fired up Martyr's Devotion as the search began.

"Even if you know they can be tamed, there's no way to tell how. That makes it tricky!"

"Yes, and I bet sometimes defeating them is the wrong answer."

Mai and Yui could beat up monsters just fine, but more obscure conditions could give them trouble. They were specced exclusively for offense and couldn't do much else.

"Let's try that forest over there. There's all kinds of animals in the woods!"

"Yeah, let's do that! I bought some of those items you need when taming. I mean, it would be so sad if you met a good pet and couldn't tame it!"

"But I thought you couldn't get any more, Maple?"

"Eh-heh-heh. I bought them to help you!"

Yui pointed to the forest, and Maple took them that way. It wasn't far out of town, but the trees went on for miles. Three sets of eyes scanned for potential monster pets.

Very little light filtered through the dense canopy. It was dark, and the underbrush was like a completely different world.

Every now and then, a monster would leap out and attack, but the trio paid these no heed. They were only after pets.

"Oh, there's one!"

"Mm? Where, where?"

Maple followed Yui's finger and spotted a little bird perched on a tree branch.

Next to its HP bar was a glowing symbol—proof it could be tamed. But before they could do anything, it flew away.

"Aww. It's gone."

"Mm...shame. Let's keep these items ready at hand!"

Maple took out one of the taming items, and they were ready for the next one.

“Oh, but you can only ever have one pet. What’s the plan there?”

“Yeah, I wanna see what’s out there before I decide.”

“Same... I’d feel bad letting it go after taming it.”

“Then let’s find the perfect partners!”

Looking for more monster varieties, they headed deeper and deeper into the woods. All sorts of tamable creatures appeared: animal types like wolves and those birds from earlier, insect types like butterflies, and even frogs and lizards.

“Most of the monsters here are pretty similar to real animals. There might be more exotic pets out there somewhere.”

“Maybe in other parts of the map. But I think I’d rather tame something *cute*.”

“I agree with Mai!”

“Then maybe we’re in the right area. We’ve covered a good amount of ground...”

But before Maple could ask if they’d made up their minds, a bear cub darted past them. And the footsteps it left behind were sparkling—this hadn’t happened with the little birds.

“Maple!”

The twins spun to face her. No words were needed.

“Yeah, let’s go after it!”

They followed the glowing footsteps as they wove through the trees. But after a long time off the beaten path, the footsteps petered out. No sign of the bear cub.

“Aww, no luck. That one looked super rare, too.”

“Shame... I hope we find it again.”

“Maple! Mind helping us look a little longer?”

They’d clearly decided what they were going to do, so Maple was happy to oblige. It wasn’t yet evident if they’d need taming items, so this could possibly take several tries.

“No problem!” she said. “And we’ve gotta find one for each of you!”

The twins’ faces lit up.

“I guess we should search deeper inside the forest? That’s where we found it the first time.”

Maple was all fired up and ready to go, but Mai had other concerns.

“Um, I think we’re too slow to catch it.”

“Yeah, it moved pretty quick.”

And with all these trees and bushes in the way, Atrocity form wouldn’t have room to run around freely. Monster Maple might be able to bulldoze through players and monsters alike, but turning on a

dime was another story.

“Maybe we should head back and talk to Iz—see if she has any items that’ll help. If we let ’em get away again, it would be too sad.”

“Good point. Let’s hope it’s not first come, first served.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine! And we’ll bring Sally next time. She’s real fast!”

With that final thought, all three went back to town.

When they reached the guild home, Maple and the twins headed straight to Iz’s workshop. There, they found her hard at work, every tool at her disposal in motion.

She was so busy they didn’t dare speak. They didn’t have to wait long before she stretched, turned to leave, and spotted them standing there.

“Oh, hey, guys. Sorry, I didn’t see you there. Just...a lot on my plate right now.”

“Oh? New items?”

“That’s right, Mai. The seventh stratum added a ton of new gear and item recipes. Monster-taming items, rare monster encounter boots—and a lot of them you can’t buy in shops. It’s a blast but also hard work.”

Iz was doing this for the guild, of course, but also just because she loved making things. She promised it would not be long before she could provide all kinds of useful gear and items.

“Well, that’s good! That’s just what we came to ask about.”

Maple filled her in on the task at hand, and Iz started rooting through what she’d already made.

Drinks that provided a temporary AGI boost, throwing items that would lower a monster’s AGI—she suggested several plans of attack. Since Iz was a high-ranking crafter, these were all very effective and would definitely make up for how slow the twins were.

“If you really need an AGI boost, though, I should make some accessories. No one in our guild really changes up their gear, but... matching your loadout to the task at hand is actually a pretty basic gaming strategy. Gimme one minute...”

Iz quickly made accessories that matched their respective color schemes and handed them over.

““Thank you!””

Mai and Yui hurried to put them on and walked around the workshop a little, trying to get used to their newfound speed. They now sported bunny ears that matched their hair and a cotton tail of the same color on the backs of their skirts. The ears, tails, and all the ribbons that were always on their clothes flounced with every step. It was adorable.

“Oh! This is nice!”

“Ultimately, it’s only a small boost and nowhere near the seventh stratum standard. If you need more, just ask!”

“Great! And thanks again!”

“We’ll give these a try!”

Mai and Yui gave a bow of thanks and were ready for another attempt at catching the bear cub. Simply catching it might not be enough, so they’d have to try different things to befriend it.

“I hope everything works out!”

“We’ll help gather materials! It sounds like there’s lots of new stuff out there.”

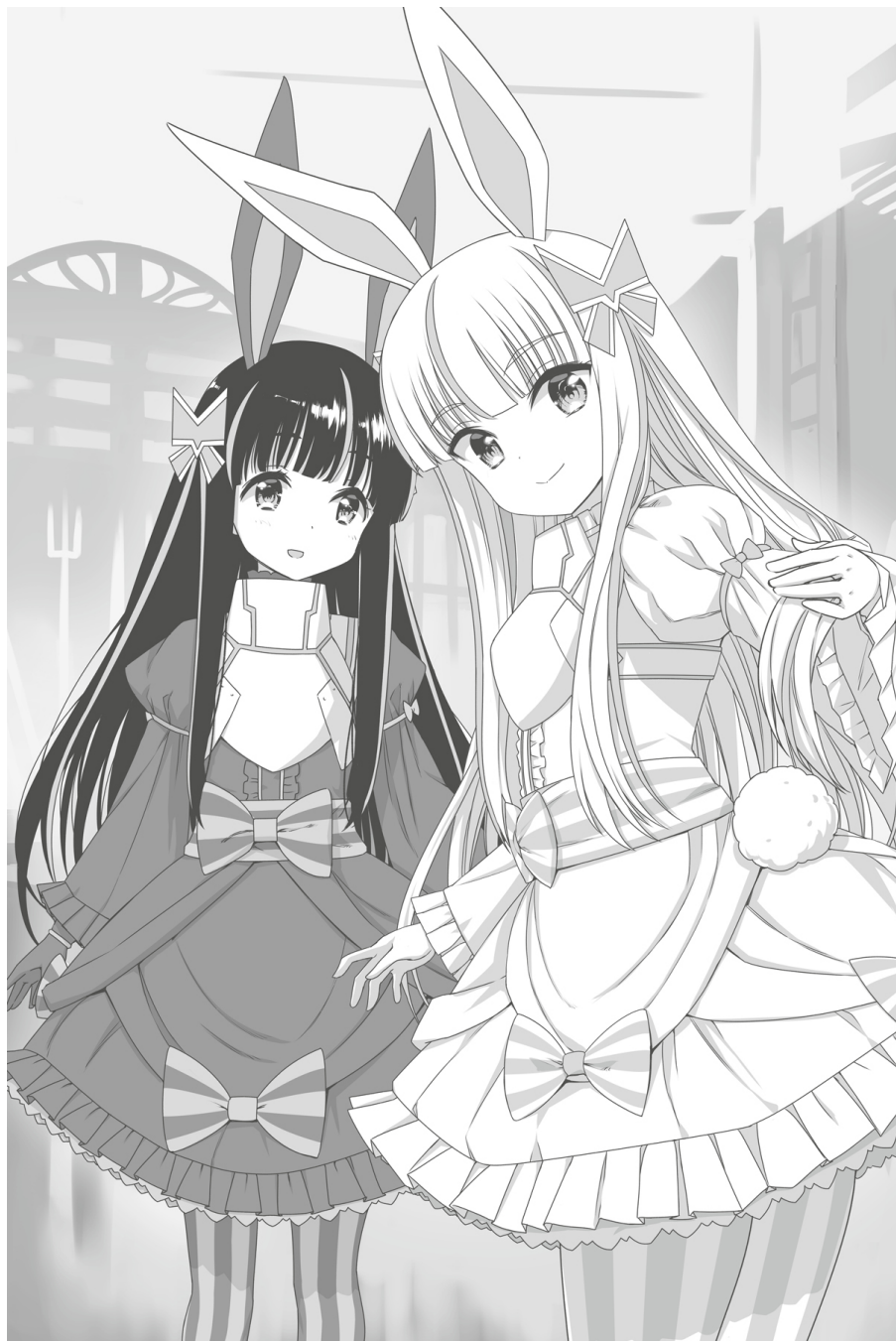
With that promise, the three left the workshop.

Maple was about to send Sally a message asking for her help when Sally walked in through the door.

“Oh, Sally! Perfect timing.”

“Mm? What’s up?”

“Um, you see...”



Maple filled her in on what they'd seen in the forest, and Sally looked interested.

"That's not on the boards yet, so it might be rare. Could be hard to find a second time, but...probably worth it."

"I'll bet! But we were hoping you were free to help catch it, Sally."

Even as Maple spoke, Sally was shaking her head. They had a test coming up, and Sally had to log out to study.

"Sure you shouldn't be doing the same?" she asked.

"Erk. Good point. Such bad timing..."

Maple had totally forgotten. Seeing that they would probably have to go it alone for a little while, Mai and Yui put their heads together to figure out what they should do next.

"We'll be fine! We've got the items Iz gave us."

"Right! We've had enough help already."

Maple was relieved to hear this. "Okay, cool! Then I'll look forward to the good news!"

"We'll be sure to have some!"

"W-we'll try, at least."

Maple said good-bye while Sally waved, and they both logged out.

The twins exchanged an anxious look but were clearly still highly motivated. They headed back out into the forest.

"We've got to find our partners, Mai!"

"Yeah. We have to try!"

But on their own, any monster on this stratum could kill them in a single hit.

They were painfully aware of that—so the only solution was to kill everything first. To make sure, they activated a new skill.

""Destroy Mode!""

This was what they'd spent their medals on. The moment it activated, red sparks flew, enveloping their bodies and weapons in a crimson aura. It was *very* intimidating. Wreathed in that light, they pressed onward—and naturally, this was not just cosmetic.

Destroy Mode

Expands range of attacks while active. Skill cooldowns significantly reduced.

Halves VIT. Doubles incoming damage.

Those downsides would be huge for anyone else, but with the twins, taking any amount of damage was usually fatal anyway. Each had two deadly hammers at the ready—and the monsters still came

charging in.

“Incoming, Yui!”

“Mm! Let me—hah!”

She swung a hammer wildly in the direction of a leaping wolf, but too low—she failed to score a direct hit. But the aura around the hammer *did* touch the wolf—and sent it tumbling away. It exploded in a shower of light.

“Wow! The hit box really is a lot bigger.”

“Mm. We can finally hit things now!”

Bigger attack ranges meant reduced blind spots. This was the epitome of *offense is the best defense*.

They looked delighted, but the other players watching looked rather sick. Their fighting style made the twins extremely distinctive. Everyone knew their regular attacks spelled instant death, so seeing those get even harder to dodge was a straight-up horror show.

But Mai and Yui were so focused on getting to the forest and finding that bear cub, they never noticed the stares.

Once they reached the woods, they started looking. Without Maple around, they had to be constantly on the lookout for ambushes. They couldn’t afford to take a hit here.

“Let’s tame it before Maple gets back!” Yui said, eyes glowing, almost dancing.

Mai nodded, almost as excited.

“We saw it pretty far in, right...?”

“Yeah, it’s a long walk.”

But a few steps later, the bushes quivered, and the twins put their backs together, on guard. A boar charged out!

““Hyah!””

Backs together, they started spinning, hammers swinging. There was no aiming. They simply used their weapons and the auras to fill as much space as they could with violence, leaving no room for a monster to slip through.

And if there was nowhere to go, their attacks would have to hit. And naturally, no ordinary monster could survive their blows.

Once more, the monsters melted—and the twins looked relieved.

“Whew...I didn’t want to walk all the way back out here.”

“Ergh, I hope we find the bear soon...”

Sweating it every time, they survived a few more monster attacks and at last reached the area where they’d found the cub last time.

“I think it was around here...”

“Mm, now we just have to get lucky.”

Staying vigilant, they started their cub search. Then the brush shook—and they saw stars rising from the ground.

““Oh!””

It was over in an instant. Before they could even throw Iz's AGI debuff items, their quarry darted back into the shrubs. The twins chugged their AGI boost potions and gave chase, pushing through the brush as they followed the sparkling star trail.

"! Yui, monsters!"

"Out of our way! Farshot!"

Mai used the same skill, and four shock waves rippled out, blowing the monsters away. They raced through the forest, but with all the monsters attacking, they couldn't quite catch up with the elusive cub's footsteps.

"Urgh, it's getting away again!"

"Ah! Yui, look out!"

"Huh? Eep!"

Panic had caused their focus to waver, and they'd missed the monster behind them. Yui got hit—and no matter how high her attack was, that was all it took to end things.

Distracted by that, Mai met the same fate—and they both found themselves back in town.

When their eyes opened, they both looked disappointed and frustrated. The twins sat down heavily on a bench.

"Ugh, no use."

"Wanna try again?"

"Of course! We can't let it get us down! If we give up this fast, we'll never get pets."

"Yeah, I agree."

Planning to hang in there until they could catch the cub on their own, they plunged once more into the woods.

Naturally, waiting for Maple would make things easier, but they wanted to get better at the game so they could explore on their own.

They died two more times and, on the third attempt, failed to find a cub at all. They wandered uselessly through the woods, defeated.

"What now? There's no sign of it."

"I think this is the right place..."

They mulled it over some more. Maybe there was a secret condition that made the bear show up.

"It's possible we've just been lucky...but I don't think that's why. Maybe we should try again the same time tomorrow."

"Let's do that. If that doesn't make it spawn again, we'll have to come up with a new plan."

The twins were dead set on making these bear cubs their pets. Everything was focused on that single goal.

"Are we done for the day?" Mai asked.

Yui considered this, then suggested something else.

“Let’s practice fighting the monsters around here. I mean, Sally said we should make it second nature.”

“True. And we could use some levels.”

“That settles it! Any materials we find, we give to Iz and have her make us something!”

And so their training began. Getting better at handling forest creatures would no doubt help them the next time they tried catching that elusive cub.



The twins were in the forest again the next day. Monsters that spawned infrequently (and consequently provided few chances to learn how they fought), plus surprise attacks from the treetops, felled Mai and Yui several times, but eventually, they made it back to where they originally found the cub.

“Th-that took so long...”

“Yeah, we need a lot more practice.”

At the very least, they knew where the forest chase began. Moving with purpose lessened the odds of encounters and in turn decreased the chances of meeting with a fatal accident.

“Oh! There it is.”

“Whew...!”

The same cub as yesterday.

This suggested it did spawn at specific times of day.

Mai and Yui hurried after the little bear, swearing to catch it this time. Their training yesterday made the fights along the way instinctive, and they easily tore through the monsters.

They made steady progress through the forest, and after some time, they emerged from the trees into the mountains.

“We’ve come pretty far.”

“Yeah...first time we’ve been here.”

The star-spewing footprints led them up the slope to a little cave halfway up the mountain.

“In we go!”

“Mm...!”

They tightened their grips on their hammers and stepped into the cave. The sparkles rising in the cub’s wake lit up the walls and ceilings.

The path gradually widened, and the light grew brighter. When they reached the back of the cave, they found a cradle made of starlight and the cub sleeping soundly inside. The room was a trifle too large to be called a nursery, and it was dazzlingly bright to boot.

““There it is!””

As if in answer, the cub sat up and looked their way. The light in the room grew even brighter, coalescing around the cub.

The twins screwed their eyes closed—and when they opened them, they found the bear all grown up and growling. Stars were shooting out of it, while its ears and pointy bits of fur shimmered like light itself.

“It got real big?!”

“And looks so strong! What do we do?”

Mai and Yui had hoped they could tame it if they simply caught up, but now they had a giant angry bear scowling at them. It was a good three yards long and more than formidable.

They didn’t have that many items left and weren’t sure *how* to tame this bear—but then a screen appeared in front of them.

Show of Force

Win the fight to tame the monster.

This looked awfully like a quest and gave them exactly the knowledge they needed. Both girls’ faces lit up.

Brute force wouldn’t be a problem.

“Let’s do this, Mai!”

“Yup! No time to hold back...”

““So this is gonna hurt!””

Dull thuds echoed throughout the cave.

“I-is it okay?”

“I...I don’t know...”

A single hit had knocked the bear down. As they fretted about using excessive force, the walls and floor began to glow again. The bear got to its feet and came over to them. It rubbed its head against them, let out a squeak, and then turned into motes of light.

“Aww...”

“Wh-what now?”

When the light faded, they opened their eyes...and found a ring on the ground.

The same kind Maple and Sally wore.

““We did it!””

Grinning, they scooped up the ring and exchanged a high five. But they were still only *halfway* to their goal. Their quest for pets would not end until they each had one.

“Come on, Mai! Let’s go back and do it again!”

“Yeah, we’ve come all this way. We can do it!”

The road traveled was every bit as hard as expected, but the goal was well worth it, and they were flying high.

Neither of them ever realized it, but taming rare monsters was *not* supposed to be this simple.

They were just doing what they always did—one-shotting the enemy before it could use any skills. This approach only worked for the hammer twins.

And having pulled it off once, they were eager to try again. They plunged straight back into the fray, made short work of the boss, and soon both had a monster of their own.

“Whew...that was exhausting!”

“But...we did it! All on our own!”

They were on the couch in the guild home living room, gazing happily at the Bonding Bridges on their fingers. And as they reveled in the afterglow, Iz came out of the back, looking every bit as pleased with herself.

“Oh, you’re back. How’d it go?”

“Total success! We both got one! See?”

“We tamed our pets!”

They showed off their rings and told Iz how they’d done it. She looked pleased her crafting had helped make it possible. And she had something else she thought they might be interested in.

“I just finished up a set of items that let you change what your pets look like. And since it sounds like you’ve both got the same monster, you might want to try these out.”

“Yes! Totally!”

“I’m definitely interested.”

“Cool. Then come this way.”

She took them to her workshop and suggested they bring out their pets.

“Oh! We haven’t even picked names yet.”

“All we were thinking about was taming them!”

They vowed to think of names soon and summoned their new friends. Adorable bear cubs spawned at their feet and began rubbing up against the twins.

“With that type...we can change the color of their fur and the shade of their skill effects.”

“We can make those any color we like?”

“Yep! Since you’ll be together all the time, you should customize them to your heart’s content.”

With the addition of the seventh stratum, pet monsters could walk around town with you—they just couldn’t use their skills inside city

limits. They weren't only a tool in battle—they were constant companions.

After a great deal of thought, the twins ended up matching their pets to their respective color schemes.

Mai chose glossy black fur, with green highlights—and a green glow when it used skills. Yui went with white fur like a polar bear and pink for the effects.

“Cool! And your name is Yukimi!” Yui said.

“Then...I'll go with Tsukimi.”

“Those are good names. Very you.”

With their pets' names official, the twins crouched down, giving head pats and calling the bears by their new names. The cubs happily rubbed up against them.

“Eh-heh-heh... Can't wait to play with you!”

“You're gonna be so helpful!”

Once they'd had their fill of petting, Mai asked, “Is everyone else still looking for the right monster?”

“More or less. I've been holed up in my workshop the whole time. Chrome's still undecided. No clue where Kanade is...and Kasumi went back to the fourth stratum for a change of pace.”

“Then I guess we're available to help out!”

“We'll go gather materials and information. And we've gotta get the bears some levels!”

“Sounds great. The seventh stratum is huge, so we don't wanna search without any idea what we're doing.”

““You can count on us!””

Mai and Yui still had lots on their plate. They needed to figure out how to fight with Yukimi and Tsukimi, for starters. But judging by the gleam in their eyes, they couldn't wait to find out.

While Mai and Yui were making friends with Tsukimi and Yukimi, one guild member had left the front lines behind for the comfort of the fourth stratum.

“Sigh. If I could tame something from this floor, that would be ideal...but I guess that’s too much to ask.”

Kasumi had looked over all available intel on the seventh stratum and failed to find any monsters that struck her fancy. For that reason, she’d gone back to the yokai-themed fourth town. Lots of monsters here fit her style, and she’d hoped some of them would be tamable. Unfortunately, none of them sported the relevant symbol. She’d known this might be the case, but it was still disappointing.

“I guess I’ll just wander around a bit and then head back up.”

Maybe the seventh stratum had undiscovered monsters that would interest her. She’d just have to find them herself.

Trying to restore her spirits, she stepped into a nearby shop.

“Hmm, so these are the new items...”

Every time there was a new map or event, Kasumi headed back to the fourth stratum to see what furniture and other collectibles had been added. This inevitably forced her to clear a bunch more quests, so it was safe to say she knew this map better than anyone.

“Actually, better check for new quests, too.”

With the premiere of the seventh stratum, monsters down here were rather weak in comparison. Feeling like that could be a good breather, Kasumi headed for a pub where many a quest began. Inside, she found a mob of yokai clustered around the tables, chittering and chattering.

She’d heard all their lines before and knew all their faces—but then her eyes found a table in the corner. A large frog was somehow sitting on the chair behind it.

“Well...that’s new.”

She went up to the table, and a blue screen appeared in the air before her.

“In the Distant Mists, hmm? Did this get added along with the seventh map?”

Kasumi grinned. This seemed promising. She accepted the quest, and the frog started talking.

“Something you wanna know?” it asked.

“More or less.”

“Keh-keh. Well, I know a good yarn. Whether you believe it or

not...that's up to you."

With that, the frog launched into a story about a valley hidden in the mists.

"They say a monster lies within. I scoffed at the very notion and ventured inside to prove my mettle...but it was all too true. I found a great beast lurking there, so fearsome I didn't even dare move."

Kasumi pressed the frog for details, but it clammed up.

"Thinking about trying your hand at the creature? Keh-keh. You'd better not. Only the strong could even make it back alive. You want to know more? Well, if you're strong enough, maybe I'll tell you."

With that, the quest description changed. It listed the monsters she'd have to kill, and they weren't just on the fourth stratum—she'd have to hit the fifth and sixth layers, too.

She'd only intended on a little diversion, so this came as a surprise—but there was no way she was passing on it now. She ran out of the bar, certain she'd stumbled upon a brand-new quest and grinning with anticipation.

"Heh-heh... Will it be the devil or just some snake in the grass?"

Kasumi decided to start where she was and made her way out of town at top speed.

"First...the imps to the west."

The goals on this floor required clearing out some trash mobs. These imps might be fairly weak on their own, but they tended to appear in large groups, and that could be a considerable threat for anyone playing solo. When she reached her destination, the imps started calling for help and piling on.

The quest goal required slaying a number of imps within a short time frame after the first kill. Kasumi drew her katana. There was a puff of smoke, and her appearance changed.

"Armored Arms! Mind's Eye!" she said.

Two arms appeared around her, and she activated her new skill that she had redeemed with medals.

Mind's Eye

Effect lasts one minute. Five-minute cooldown.

Makes the hit range of monster attacks and player skills visible.

With this skill activated, she could see a red path indicating where each imp's club would go. All she had to do was stay away, and she'd take no damage from their swings.

“I wonder if this is how Sally sees the world...Blood Blade!”

She was completely surrounded but knew exactly where *not* to stand.

Calmly twisting herself out of harm's way, she activated her blighted skill. The blade liquefied, lashing out like a whip and mowing down the imps. The two arms floating beside her each held a katana and automatically cut down even more foes.

Rather than pick a medal skill that upped her DPS, Kasumi had chosen to make her combat performance more consistent. She could reliably fight at either close range or midrange, and the boost to her defensive skills made her excellent at fighting solo.

“One minute... Cool. Wrapped it up while Mind's Eye was still active.”

She sheathed her blade with a sharp *schiiing* as the last of the imps burst into light.

“Blood Blade sure does wonders. I guess the fifth stratum is next?”

With the first goal easily dispatched, she headed up a level.

Kasumi's feet carried her to the target location on the fifth floor. Here, she needed to gather an item from the depths of a dungeon. A feather from a certain bird that nested in high places.

“Haven't been here in a while...but let's not stay long.”

She kicked off the cloud floor, plunging into the dungeon. Like the rest of the fifth stratum, the dungeon's corridors were made from gleaming white clouds—but there were pools of water and ice hovering here and there. At regular intervals, a bolt of lightning would shoot through these. If that hit her, it would deal a lot of damage.

“Hard to say how bad it'll hurt without taking a hit. Tenth Blade: Diamond.”

Kasumi drank potions Iz had given her, raising her paralysis resistance and reducing lightning damage. Then she used a skill that lowered AGI and DEX but improved her status effect resistance *and* reduced damage.

On solo dungeon crawls, anything that sealed your movement—paralysis or stun effects—could quickly prove fatal, so she was being extra cautious. She wasn't Maple—she couldn't just outright ignore everything.

“Guess that's good enough.”

She darted down the hall. Bolts shot past, but they didn't slow Kasumi down. The status effects she'd been worried about missed, and with her damage reduced twice over, her health stayed well within the range potions could solve.

“.....!”

As she downed a potion, the drops and ice ahead converged—spawning monsters made of water and ice, respectively. Kasumi drew her blade to attack, but the monsters let out a shrill screech and transformed into an ice wall that blocked the entire passage.

“Using the terrain against me? Well, here I come! Armored Arms! Sixth Blade: Inferno!”

She summoned her dual arms and wreathed her own blade in fire, melting her way right through the wall.

The monsters’ transformation had increased their durability, but her damage was stronger still, shattering the walls.

But as she stepped through the remains, she found yet another wall.

And lightning bolts were coming hard and fast from behind. Kasumi’s defense was as good as her offense, so she could afford to soak those bolts while smashing her way down the hall.

“Whew...man, I’m getting pretty good, here.”

Everyone in her guild might be growing in the craziest ways, but if Kasumi buffed herself right and used compatible attacks, she was plenty strong in her own right.

This proved the effectiveness of her approach and came as a relief.

Once she escaped the lightning corridor, she found herself in a wide-open area, with two paths leading in.

“Hmm.”

The clouds provided some camouflage, but she still spotted a little white bird sleeping there. It had white down and wings made of clouds. The bird sensed Kasumi’s approach and flapped its wings, wafting off toward the passage in back.

“I need the mother bird’s feathers. Better follow.”

There were two exits, but the bird had told her which one to take.

“Maybe you can tame monsters like that, too.”

This quest had been added to the fourth stratum, and its existence strongly suggested it was worth checking out all the old maps regularly.

“A blizzard next?” she said, peering down the next passage.

Seeing that up ahead told her what items and skills would come in handy. Once all the preparations had been made, she charged in. She rinsed and repeated this until she caught a glimpse of clear sky ahead.

“I’m through. Not a bad time.”

She’d handled the stage gimmicks and made quick work of monsters. Pleased with her progress, she climbed the final hill.

Here stood a copse of trees made entirely of clouds. Resting on the tips of the branches were nests filled with baby birds—and festooned with cloud feathers from a much larger bird.

“I’ll be taking one of those. That’s what I came for.”

She moved quickly across a cloud and scooped up a feather, then took her leave before the mother bird came back.

“The last requirement’s a big one.”

The sixth stratum task. She had to defeat a boss-level undead.

“I’m in good shape. Might as well head straight there.”

With two victories under her belt, she rode the momentum and was soon at her final destination.

It was a wide-open field with no major obstacles on it. An ancient battlefield dotted with bloodstained battered swords and armor. Everyone had long agreed it *ought* to house something significant, but nothing had ever really happened here.

“.....”

But an active quest had led her to this spot, so there *must* be something. Katana in hand, Kasumi crossed the battlefield.

“...Is that it?”

Purple fire—a different shade from Kasumi’s own—sprang up from the ground around her. The mists thickened.

She raised her blade as a headless knight emerged from the heavy fog, its armor and longsword spattered in blood.

“Better than a big one at least! Mind’s Eye! Armored Arms! First Blade: Heat Haze!”

With two extra arms, she could dish out more hits. And Mind’s Eye would let her know when to risk a charge. First Blade made it possible to instantly close the gap.

Kasumi’s initial strike was blocked, but the armored limbs swung oversize blades that sank deep into the headless knight’s shoulder and torso. These solid hits carved chunks out of its HP.

“Fourth Blade: Whirlwind!”

To keep the pressure up, she went into a combo to pile on even more damage.

She forced her opponent to use its sword to stop her onslaught, but the extra hands gave her a clear advantage.

Still, right as her combo ended, Mind’s Eye showed the next enemy attack blanketing her surroundings.

“Leap! Third Blade: Blue Moon!”

Kasumi bounded into the air and then used a skill to propel herself even higher.

An instant later, purple flames erupted from the ground around them. She managed to stay airborne long enough for them to die down, but there was no sign of the headless knight.

“Ha, I see you.”

She swung around, blade at the ready. Mind’s Eye showed the next attack coming, and the knight appeared from the mist once more.

Kasumi herself had a move that made her momentarily vanish and zip around, and that let her predict exactly how the knight would attack.

“Parry and slash!”

She changed her approach, focusing on blocking the enemy’s hits and letting Armored Arms do all the attacking for her. When those blows made the knight stagger, she hit hard and then waited to see what it would do next.

Kasumi took care to minimize the damage she took while gradually eliminating its health pool, slowly but surely. Once its health fell low, the knight lost its balance.

“Purple Phantom Blade!”

The ten-hit combo slammed home.

Phantasmal swords swung down hard. They came from the right and left, advancing inexorably.

The headless knight had no way to escape and was too off-balance to block. The Armored Arms were still attacking all the while.

After all ten hits ended, the blades vanished, only to appear again in a circle around the knight—right before flashing forward to run it through. Kasumi had estimated its total health pool from the initial damage she had dealt and correctly gauged how much remained. As the swords turned the knight into a pincushion, it crumpled to the ground. Now it was just one of the many bloodstained suits of armor that dotted this field.

The mist around her faded. The fires died down.

Only mini Kasumi remained.

“*Sigh*...if it weren’t for this complication, it’d be the best skill.”

The very conspicuous side effects meant she could only use that move as a finisher. To avoid being spotted by passersby, she dragged her katana into the woods nearby and sat down on a tree stump.

“Once I’m back to normal, I’ll go turn this in. If it leads me to a pet monster...heh-heh, a whole new way to make myself stronger.”

Imagining what this pet might be, Kasumi waited for her body to revert to normal.

Once she was full-size again, Kasumi went back to the fourth stratum and checked in with the frog.

“Huh. Not half bad. Okay, okay. I’ll tell you more. The valley lies in a distant land. I can’t tell you how long I searched, seeking the truth behind the tales. Before I knew it, the mist was all around me—and two red lights glowed within.”

And with that, the frog fell silent.

“What then?” Kasumi asked.

“Keh-keh,” the frog chuckled. “I don’t remember anything else. Before I knew it, I was free of the mist’s embrace.”

Realizing there was no more to learn, Kasumi drooped—but then the frog slid a piece of paper her way.

It had a simple map and a red X marking the destination.

“If you must see it with your own eyes, then go. But don’t blame me if it kills you.”

And with that, the frog turned back to its drink. This time it was undoubtedly finished with its story. Kasumi looked the map over, trying to ascertain her next destination.

“Where...is this? Mountains...a forest and a spring? If that X is the valley...”

She pulled up maps of every floor and compared the sketch against them. It didn’t take long to find a likely location.

“The valley on the seventh stratum!”

Kasumi had been there already. But she’d spotted no monsters with good XP and nothing that looked worth taming, so she had turned back without exploring the depths.

“This time, I’ve got the flag tripped.”

Steeling herself for the real fight, Kasumi returned to the game’s front lines. Seeing the quest ended on the newest map, her hopes were rising. She was getting tired, but anticipation washed away her fatigue and sent her straight to the valley on the map.

“Doesn’t seem any different.”

The valley was certainly deep but also quite wide. Peering over the edge, Kasumi saw a forest at the bottom.

This was exactly what she’d seen the last time. No signs of the fabled mist mentioned in the quest. Her view was clear and unobstructed.

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

Kasumi nimbly hopped down the cliff face, effortlessly making it to the floor below.

“Still no monsters.”

The forest itself was eerily silent. No signs of any foes. No birds singing. There weren’t even any leaves rustling.

“Guess I’m going in dark.”

The frog’s map led her to the valley, but there wasn’t a single clue about *where* in the valley she should go.

All she could do was power through the forest.

“Cross my fingers for a sign.”

The quest itself was still active, so Kasumi figured there must be *something* here. But no matter how long she walked, she found nothing interesting. Time continued to pass uneventfully. The trees just went on and on with no signs of life or anything else.

“...Is this the right place? Did I miss something?”

She pressed on awhile longer, but despite her high hopes, nothing changed. Her fatigue was catching up with her, and her pace slowed.

“Ugh, maybe that’s enough for today... Hmm?”

She’d closed her eyes and lowered her head, about to call it quits—but when she looked up to log out, she found herself surrounded by a thick fog.

“Oh! Great!?!”

She was happy for an instant—and then felt an ominous presence behind her and swung around, hand on her hilt. Two glowing red orbs pierced the fog that was so thick she couldn’t see more than a foot away.

“I can’t move...! Paralysis?!”

The lights were coming closer. And Kasumi was frozen stiff.

Kasumi soon knew what those red orbs were.

They weren’t just lights. They were *eyes*.

Red glowing eyes. The sound of something slithering through the silent woods. White scales that blended into the thick fog.

The last thing Kasumi saw was a snake far larger than her—opening its jaws.

Succumbing to her fate, she closed her eyes...and then opened them again.



And was not surprised to find herself back in the seventh stratum town.

“...Didn’t expect a *literal* snake. But what now?”

She’d been paralyzed not by fear, but a negative status effect. She was sure of that much, but her log showed nothing of the sort.

“If it wasn’t paralysis...does that mean I can’t counter it? I’m not even sure what I could try.”

Kasumi frowned. The encounter conditions themselves were unclear, as were the strategies required—that meant she’d just have to walk all the way back out there with each failure.

This was going to be a grueling conquest.

“But a white snake...yeah. Mm...I like it.”

Her frown faded. She was nodding like she’d struck gold.

“Let’s give it another run, at least. Right now, I just don’t know anything.”

It had been so fast and one-sided she’d gleaned almost no intel.

She didn’t care how many times it killed her. She’d have to trial and error her way to some facts.

When Kasumi ventured into the valley again, the fog soon sprang up to meet her.

“Ha! Already sees me as a threat, then? That saves time. Mind’s Eye!”

With her new skill active, Kasumi hid in the brush, scanning her surroundings. She heard a slither approaching, and an attack zone slid toward her.

“So it attacks everything on sight. Looks like it can’t see all that far, though.”

While Mind’s Eye was still active, she avoided its gaze, approaching its body.

“It’s pretty big—but worth a shot.”

Kasumi drew her katana and activated Armored Arms and Purple Phantom Blade.

This was her most powerful attack, the move that had finished off the headless knight.

The first strike hit home. Scales split, and damage sparks flew.

That seemed promising, but Kasumi’s next attack and the blows from her extra arms bounced right off the gleaming white scales.

“Wha...?!”

Since this was a combo move, she couldn’t cancel it midway—she was forced to watch every subsequent blow get deflected the exact same way. Then her body shrank. Her attacks had been completely ineffective. It didn’t feel like it was due to high defense, either. This

was more like trying to attack an indestructible object.

“Guess I’ll see what hap—”

Kasumi froze stiff.

If she couldn’t move, that meant the snake had turned to look at her.

Just get it over with! she thought.

She could see the snake’s shadow looming over her...and then she was back in town.

Until her body went back to normal, Kasumi hid in a deserted alley, thinking.

“It’s not like I can’t hurt it at all, but it also doesn’t seem beatable.”

It felt reasonable to assume her first attack had done damage because she caught it by surprise.

But nothing else had hurt it at all, and the initial attack ended up drawing its attention. That made it clear attacking at all was a bad idea.

“And it’s not so much paralysis as much as it straight-up seals movement. That’s way more powerful. And if I can’t move, I can’t fight back...”

If the goal here wasn’t a fight, then maybe she was supposed to hide from the snake to reach some other objective. That sounded rough.

The valley was extremely large. Her initial search for the snake had proven just how wearying a random search could be down there.

“Well, I should probably try to reach either end of the valley. At least it seems like I won’t have trouble locating the snake itself.”

But exploring stealthily required a different approach.

Mind’s Eye would be essential. Her survival depended on her ability to detect instant-death attacks that could come without warning.

“I guess that’s enough for today. I’ll need to rethink my loadout. Maybe talk to that frog again.”

There was always a chance it had an extra hint now that she’d reached the next stage.

But she’d already been to several stratum and challenged the valley twice, so she’d been playing a long time. The fun of it had been winning out, but she was definitely getting tired. And she’d used a bunch of Iz’s items on that dungeon mid-quest. All good reasons to hang up her sword and log out.



The next day, Kasumi visited Iz for a restock, then went to talk to the frog. It *did* have more to say.

“You actually went? You sure play fast and loose with your life,” it began. “I know you won’t heed my warnings. So let me at least give you a word of advice. Keh-keh—it’s all coming back to me. The only reason I got away is because I landed a lucky hit on its brow. Aim right between the eyes.”

This was good intel, and Kasumi was pleased to hear it.

But once the snake’s eyes were on her, she wouldn’t be able to attack. This intel would only be useful if she maintained the element of surprise.

“I don’t wanna go anywhere near its head, but I’ll bear that in mind.”

After confirming the frog had nothing else to offer, Kasumi headed back to the seventh stratum.

“Third time’s the charm?”

Kasumi fired up Mind’s Eye, located the snake’s head, and moved silently through the fog-drenched woods. If she kept her distance from the head, she could avoid the threat of instant death.

“If I’m supposed to make it somewhere, maybe the source?”

She found a tiny creek and followed it upstream.

Each time Mind’s Eye ran out, she found some thick brush, a little hollow, or a tree to climb, keeping herself safe until the cooldown ended.

This brought her steadily toward the source of the creek, which lay at the end of the valley.

“The mist is thinning...! Wait, what is *that*?”

Kasumi quickly hid behind a tree, making observations. Before her eyes was a cave—and the ground around it *moved*. Snakes large and small were guarding the place. An especially large white snake was coiled up, blocking the bulk of the cave entrance.

The creek ran into the cave, suggesting something lay inside. But Mind’s Eye was showing the entire area blanketed in the snakes’ attack zones, with almost no gaps anywhere. Their individual strengths might have varied, but if any of these snakes saw her...she’d be immobilized.

“I’ve gotta get past it...but how?”

The slithering sound had died away. The white snake seemed disinclined to budge. She had time to wait for Mind’s Eye’s cooldown and to think of a good plan.

“I guess...I go up? Let’s try that. In which case...it’s a matter of nerves.”

Kasumi climbed to the top of a tree, pushing the leaves aside and

scoping out the view below. Even from above, there was no gap to be seen. She had to get that snake out of the way.

“Here goes nothing. Superspeed! Leap! Third Blade: Blue Moon!”

She threw herself out of the tree, giving herself a burst of speed and swinging her blade down.

Blue Moon was not *just* a double-jump skill. That air time was actually a setup for a powerful slash.

And Kasumi’s aim was true—her slash struck the white snake right in the brow.

This was no combo, so she was free to move—but before she even touched down, the snake’s head reared up, trying to fix her with its petrifying glare.

But that also meant its head was no longer blocking the cave entrance.

“Just what I was waiting for!”

As she spoke, there was an explosion. Kasumi took a ton of damage—and was blown into the cave. She landed in a roll, moving farther in and away from the snake’s glare.

“Ugh...how does Maple do it?”

Kasumi chugged a potion to restore her health and stood up.

All she’d done was employ the same strategy Maple used to fly—by making Machine God’s weapons explode. Kasumi had asked Iz to make a small but powerful bomb and then used it to blow herself up, tanking the damage to propel herself forward.

“Maybe there was a better way, ha-ha. I didn’t really feel like waiting around, though.”

Kasumi cautiously headed farther in. There she found a spring. This had to be the source of the creek.

At the water’s edge was a tiny white snake. This one had the tamable symbol on it. When Kasumi waited to see what it would do, it slithered forward, winding itself around her and climbing her body. When it reached her shoulders, it stopped, flicking its tongue.

“Does it like me? How do I tell?”

She tried gently rubbing its head. The snake seemed rather pleased. Relieved, Kasumi broke into a smile. After receiving a quest-completion alert, a new spurt of water bubbled up in the creek. A glowing ring bobbed to the surface. Kasumi scooped it up and happily held it close.

“Your name’ll be... Well, give me till we get back to town. I wonder what’s going on outside?”

She peered through the cave entrance and saw that the fog had lifted. Just a silent forest, with no snakes to be found.

“Whew, at least the way home is easy enough. Are you gonna get that big?”

Kasumi gave her snake another rub on the head, unsure whether to be worried or excited about its future growth.

“The quest ended...but it might be worth checking in with the frog anyway. He might have more to say.”

When Kasumi reached the fourth stratum, there was a little more to it.

“Keh-keh, that’s a good one. Not only do you come back alive, but you’ve also tamed the thing. Another story for my repertoire. Stop by again when you get a chance. I’ve got more tales where that came from.”

“I’ll do that.”

No telling if this frog would lead her anywhere else in the future, but it seemed well worth remembering.

When Kasumi walked into the guild with a white snake in tow, she found the other members gathered around the twins.

“Hey, Kasumi!”

“Mm? Oh, you both found partners?”

They paraded their bear cubs in front of her. In response, the white snake coiled around Kasumi’s neck reared its head.

“Oh! Is that your pet, Kasumi?”

“Yeah, I’ve named it Haku. Which just means white, so maybe a little straightforward...”

She didn’t think she was all that great at naming things and scratched her cheek sheepishly, but Haku was slithering around looking very pleased.

“I like it!”

“Yes, it’s perfect!”

The twins’ enthusiasm was infectious, and Kasumi was starting to grin despite herself.

Three guild members still didn’t have a partner yet, and they were putting their heads together.

“All right, that just leaves me, Kanade, and Iz.”

“Yeah, I’ve run through the crafting lineup, so it’s probably time I left my workshop.”

“I should start searching, myself. It is the point of this stratum.”

“Lots of info out there now,” Sally said. “Hopefully there’s something you guys like.”

Stroking the bears’ heads, she shared what she’d heard.

What types of monsters were found where, areas that seemed like they held secrets, rare monsters that could only be encountered at certain times of day or if you had certain skills—some of this info was stuff she’d learned herself and wasn’t on any of the boards yet.

“Since Maple and I already have pets, we’re here to help anyone who needs it.”

“Speaking of Maple—she’s not here?”

Kasumi glanced around, but their guild leader was definitely missing.

“The tests are over, so she’s logged in, but...”

Speak of the devil—at that exact moment, the door swung open, and Maple stepped in.

She quickly spotted Tsukimi, Yukimi, and Haku, and her eyes lit up.

“They’re all so cute! These are your pet monsters?”

Maple moved to pet all three of them, looking delighted.

“Our guild home’s gonna be so lively!”

“Yeah, it’s nice that we can let them out to play here now,” Sally said, glancing at her feet. Oboro was sitting there, and Syrup was at Maple’s feet.

Their guild might only have eight members, but with monsters running around inside, the place felt a lot more alive.

“Oh, hey, we were just trading information. You find anything, Maple?”

“Um, well, this is sort of weird, but...I have tentacles now!”

“You what...?”

This was not the response Sally had anticipated, and Maple was forced to repeat herself.

How had this happened? This floor was about making friends with monsters, so how had Maple managed to become the monster? These thoughts spun in every mind present, but they all chose to say nothing until they’d seen it for themselves.

They moved to the training room and waited for Maple to use her new skill.

“Here we go! Lure of the Deep!”

As she spoke the name, her shield arm turned to several massive, wriggling tentacles, all a deep blue color. The white of her left eye turned black, and the iris became gold. When she moved her hand, the tentacles split into five, moving like fingers and bunching like they were grabbing something.

Everyone exchanged glances and started whispering.

“That shouldn’t happen.”

“You can say that again.”

“If I ran into her in the wild, I’ve have drawn on impulse.”

It had been a while since Maple did anything this inhuman, and the grown-ups forgot to respond. Maple saw them whispering to each other, gathered what they were saying, and started waving the tentacles around while making excuses.

“Listen, there’s a legitimate reason for these! Well, maybe not. Anyway, it just happened!”

Naturally, Maple’s arm had not mutated spontaneously.

The story of how it happened occurred slightly earlier...

Maple had finished her tests and jumped right back into the game.

But she already had the perfect partner, Syrup, and didn't need to think about taming monsters the way everyone else was.

"So where should I go?"

She checked a map of the seventh stratum, formulating a plan. Sally had suggested that she focus on gathering information until the next event started or a new stratum was added.

"Well, it's a guild master's job to help the whole guild get stronger!" Maple said, getting herself amped up. But if she was honest, at least 70 percent of her motivation was the yearning to see everyone with a cute pet. A worthy goal in its own right.

"This reminds me of the second event—but this time I've got Syrup from the start!"

Like that event's map, the seventh stratum had all kinds of terrains and themes. Not to mention a wide variety of monsters. If you wanted an ice-type monster, better head to those snowcapped peaks. Fire? Hit up the local volcano.

"Hmm, but climbing mountains is hard."

She scratched her head over the map awhile longer and then nodded, her mind made up. She closed the map.

"Then off I go!"

Flying on Syrup's back, she peered over the edge and saw players fighting alongside tamed monsters. They must have already chosen pets.

"Wow, everyone's already making friends! Just like when I found you, Syrup!"

Maple wondered if making friends with a bird would let you fly, too.

"It would be nice if everyone could fly. But if the skies were full of other players, our walks would be a lot less relaxing."

The third stratum's skies had been teeming with flying machines, and she wasn't sure she wanted to experience that again.

They flew on and soon arrived at her destination.

Before Maple was the broad expanse of the ocean and a long beach. She could see islands on the horizon, and the water itself looked very deep.

"Wow...this looks like the biggest one yet!"

Maple put on a snorkel and had Syrup bob on the water's surface,

just like it bobbed around the sky. Together, they sailed out to sea. Back in the real world, Sally had given her a rundown on where people had been taming monsters, so Maple knew nobody had found any rare pets out at sea yet. That was why she'd promised to scope it out sometime.

"Boats seem like lots of work...but Syrup can take me anywhere!"

Since it was propelled by Maple's Psychokinesis, it wasn't exactly fast, but they could move at a steady clip no matter what the wind or waves were doing. And since Maple wasn't wearing herself out or struggling with anything in her way, she was the perfect candidate for a leisurely ocean exploration.

"Any fish that seem friendly?"

Maple was lying down on Syrup's shell with her face stuck in the water, peering into the depths. There were monsters down there, but as expected, none of them had the tamable symbol.

She pulled her head out, taking a deep breath.

"Even if you *could* tame a fish, would they be able to leave the water?"

But then Maple realized it would probably work like Sally's Ancient Ocean skill, and they'd just swim around the area in a water-filled bubble.

"I could see dolphins or whales being a possibility! But they'd have to be pretty rare..."

On the lookout for any unusual monsters, she sailed across the surface, regularly checking the water. After exploring awhile, she took a break on a little island with a single palm tree after putting Syrup back in the ring.

"Whew...seriously, no dolphins or whales anywhere?"

Maple put a hand to her brow, gazing at the far-off beach. Then she flopped down on her back, arms and legs stretched wide.

"What do I do next?"

She let the breeze brush over her for a while. That was when she heard a splash, like something emerging from the water nearby.

"Urp, what was that?!"

Maple scrambled to her feet, turning toward the sound—and saw ominous-looking black tentacles stretching out of the water, reaching toward her. Being tentacles, they didn't exactly have faces, but she could still tell they were after her.

"Er...wait, noooooo!"

She tried to run but was far too slow. A tentacle grabbed Maple around the torso and lifted her into the air.

"That's how you wanna play it? Atrocity!"

She went monster mode to avoid getting dragged into the water, but now she was in a regular kaiju battle.

Then she realized it wasn't dragging her to the *water*. Dark mist was spoiling the clean water, and the tentacles were sticking out of that. Maple struggled with all her might, but it was too late.

She vanished into the muck.

For a moment, she was passing through darkness, but before long, the floating sensation gave way to a hard landing on solid ground.

"...A-am I still in one piece? That was a real shocker..."

But when she tried to pick herself up, she found she had very little room to move and couldn't really do much in monster form. Maple was pretty much the only player who ever got stuck on walls in this game.

"I've gotta drop it already? Ugh, such a waste."

Maple reverted to her regular body, falling out of the monster's belly.

Sitting up, she found herself in a cave, surrounded by wet rocks. The walls and ground were covered in that same black mist Maple had just been dragged through.

"All right, guess I'm exploring here!"

She headed down the hall, squeezing between rocks...but soon reached a dead end.

"Huh? That's it...eep?!"

When she turned around, she found tentacles reaching out of the mist again. They grabbed her and pulled her in *again*. She was flung out in another rocky space, barely different from the last.

"Ugh, what's going on?"

Maple wasn't taking damage but felt like she'd been thrown right back where she started. She decided to think this through.

It wasn't every day you got surprise tentacled. She double-checked to make extra sure she hadn't been hurt. A quick examination revealed her HP bar was still maxed out.

"No damage, so I'm good! Cool!"

Trying very hard to convince herself everything was fine, she inspected each patch of mist.

She soon figured out the tentacles were coming from all the mist patches. But not all tentacles were the same. The numbers and grip strength varied.

That made it clear what she was supposed to do here. There were a number of paths to the goal, some easier, some harder. Perhaps there was only one correct path.

"Hnnngg...this is more Kanade's thing. And even if you *can* tame anything here..."

Maple didn't really feel like suggesting he acquire a pet with a bunch of tentacles. And unless she made it through and checked, she

couldn't be sure there actually was a tamable monster. Since she had no idea which was the right choice, she headed out blindly, figuring she'd just turn back if she hit a dead end.

She made up her mind and grabbed a tentacle—but clearly the wrong one. Lots of tentacles grabbed her back, squeezing hard and shaking her around. Anyone else would have definitely taken a ton of damage.

“You blobby tentacles can't hurt me! Full Deploy!”

Figuring quantity was best, she sprouted weapons and started spraying bullets. She wasn't sure if the walls were extra hard or the mist was a factor, but her bullets were ricocheting off the walls and bouncing like crazy all over the cramped space. And off the tentacles, too.

“Wow! So much bouncing! Oh...they're hitting a lot, but not doing much... Does the stickiness reduce the damage?”

Maybe they were sliding on the slippery surface. The tentacles were clearly taking damage—just not as much as she was used to.

She threw out Hydra and Devour, running through her core attack program. That finally proved too much for them.

“They aren't pointy, so no risk of piercing damage... Let's keep on going!”

Maple stomped on through the cave. She passed through a number of tentacle-filled wrong passages that were obviously not the correct path, but it was all the same to her. Attacks that were hard to dodge? Powerful? Constricting? If they couldn't actually hurt her, she'd get past them eventually.

“Whew, I've come a long way. And it's starting to look different!”

By which she meant weathered bones and walls covered in dried blood. Morbid signs that lots of things had died in here.

“It grabbed me and pulled me in, so maybe it plans to eat me later?”

This space might exist to weaken its prey before proper feeding time.

And Maple had used a lot of ammo to free herself from the persistent imprisonment.

“But going back now would be such a waste... I guess I'll just try and aim carefully.”

Nothing that bound Maple could possibly be friendly. She could already tell there was going to be a big fight at the end. She took a rest, trying to think of a better idea.

“Hmm...well, let's try some things next time they grab me. Not like it hurts!”

She couldn't exactly experiment unless she was in a tentacle's clutches. She put her ideas on the backburner and headed deeper in.

But from that point on, she must have lucked into the right route given how all the tentacles she did find were easily dispatched.

“Huh...I’ve come a *long* way.”

She slid through another gap in the rocks and found an entire wall of mist. The moment Maple stepped in, the biggest tentacles yet reached out, instantly wrapping around every inch of her. The grip strength and speed were far beyond anything before.

“Full Deplo—ugh!”

She was pulled into the mist before she could get a single weapon out.

When the tentacles let go, there was a huge splash—she’d been dropped on a watery floor.

“Hngg, this looks like the end, at least.”

Maple looked around, and it definitely smelled like a boss room. Rock walls all around, no exits, and standing water at her feet. Since the water itself looked black, there was no telling what lay beneath. Before she dared take a step, there was an even bigger splash, and tentacles reached out of the water.

These tentacles were extra huge and very thick—suggesting the *real* monster was underneath. Maple took a step back despite herself.

“Oh, that’s right!”

Careful to avoid the depths, she ran away from the tentacles, rifling through her inventory. What she took out was—of course—something Iz had made. Maple wasn’t capable of learning the Diving skill, but this item allowed her to hold her breath a bit longer underwater.

“Right, ready when you are!”

Maple turned around, but before she got her weapon raised, a massive tentacle filled her entire field of view.

With immense force, it tightened around her, squeezing hard and hoisting her into the air. The water around the tentacle’s base was inky black and very deep—and it was pulling her toward those depths.

“!”

When she saw that, she activated Devour. There was an HP bar in the water, but it barely budged—though it did cut a gap in the tentacle, allowing Maple to free herself.

“Th-that was close. Ugh, so many!”

Tentacles were popping out of the water everywhere.

One tried to grab her, but this time, she got her shield out in time. Devour activated—but did no damage. It just turned to black mist, dissolving.

“A fake?! Oh! That makes sense.”

It was unrealistic for any one monster to have *this* many tentacles.

It seemed very reasonable that only a few of them were actually real. But she had no time to stand around nodding—a tentacle swung low at the back of her feet, knocking her into the air.

She knew there were two types of tentacles—but had no idea how to tell them apart.

“Whoa?! Oh, okay. That didn’t hurt.”

Maple might be sailing through the air, but she didn’t let that get her down. She let herself fall, planning her counteroffensive.

But before she landed, the air filled with black mist—like a dissolved tentacle—and Maple went flying right into the thick of it. She instinctively shut her eyes but felt no pain—just flubbed her landing, falling face-first on the ground. Naturally, this didn’t do any damage.

“Okay, time to fight back! Hydra!”

Maple scrambled to her feet and threw out her hand—but there was no short sword in it.

“Hwuh?!”

She let out a very silly noise and looked herself over. Her armor and shield were gone, too. All her equipment was missing, and she was back in her default outfit, like when she’d just started playing. She was still reeling when the missing gear fell out of the black mist.

“Ah! That’s mine!”

If she lost her gear, there were a lot of skills Maple couldn’t use. She tried to get it back, but a tentacle grabbed her and pulled her toward the water.

“Arghhh! There’s too many! It’s not fair!”

With that final protest, she was dragged under. If she’d had decent STR, she could have freed herself from the tentacles, but that option wasn’t available to a defense specialist. At a loss, she looked up—and saw a bunch of mist clouds with tentacles reaching from them, like the path leading the way.

“Mm! Mm...mm!”

As she neared the bottom, Maple finally saw the boss’s true form. A giant octopus, dozens of yards long, yellow eyes glowing in the deep. For now, at least, there was no tamable symbol by the HP bar.

Iz’s item was helping, but if Maple got stuck down here for long, she’d run out of time, start taking damage, and die. But with her gear gone, she had few means of resistance and wasn’t sure how she could get back to the surface. She was forced to roll the dice.

“Full Deploy! Commence Assault!”

First, she deployed her weapons underwater, blowing them up to burn the tentacles off her.

Then she used those explosions to propel herself not to the surface, but to the bottom. She’d noticed there weren’t any tentacles

down there and thought she might have more room to maneuver.

Her weapons detonated again, this time rocketing her toward the boss itself. The octopus started getting ready to feed, making it seem almost as if she'd just saved it some time.

Maple had been waiting for that and redeployed her weapons, blasting herself forward at even higher speeds directly into the octopus's mouth. Human-cannonball Maple forced her way through the half-open orifice into the boss's belly.

As she'd hoped, there was no water inside. She'd successfully made it to what could be considered dry land. Her gamble had paid off.

"Whew! I'm glad this wasn't my first time getting eaten. I see why Sally says practice makes perfect!"

Maple redeployed her weapons, finally ready to fight back.

It's never a good idea to ingest volatile substances. At her battle cry, the octopus's belly filled with ricocheting bullets and an even more prodigious quantity of red damage sparks.

"Cool, the bullets are still sliding off, but they bounce around enough that—oof?!"

Just as her barrage appeared to be successful, black mist spawned inside the belly, and a giant tentacle batted her aside.

"Huh? Wh-why?! I'm inside you!"

Maple was sent flying out the mouth as fast as she'd gone in, spit out into the water. Her plan *had* worked, but now she was right back where she'd started. She got ready to rocket back in, wondering how she'd deal with interior tentacles.

A new battle began. Maple needed to get herself eaten to win, and the octopus was an omnivore that could consume anything but her.

While she was out, she glanced up and saw the surface still covered with tentacles. She decided to recover her gear later, rocketing herself back at the boss's mouth.

"You're not spitting me out again!"

Once inside, Maple used Wool Up to expand her surface area, then Crystallization to make herself as hard as a rock, wedging herself in place. It was as if the octopus had swallowed a boulder whole. It couldn't knock her out, and she couldn't move—but Maple's crystallized furball form was designed for blowing herself up. Only her face was outside the hard wool crust, and mist-spawned tentacles were currently shoving against it.

But she was lodged firmly in place, immobilized, and all they were doing was smooshing her nose.

"You brought me here to eat! If you keep trying to shirk your duties, I'll have to eat you right back! Oh, that's actually not a bad

idea.”

Maple couldn't move until Crystallization ran out, so to rack up as much damage as possible and pay back the tentacles, she bit the one pressed against her face. It was covered in black mist and gnarly looking, but it *was* still an octopus and tasted like one. Maple's inventory was full of fruit with poisonous-sounding names and mushrooms with visuals that clearly said *not edible*. This tasted *much* better.

“Mmph. That's really not half bad.”

While she was gnawing on it, her skill ran out. Maple fired all her guns, igniting all the bombs she'd placed in the wool. The explosion was ridiculous, and the force of it propelled her out the one exit—the mouth.

“Mm!”

Her mouth was full of misty octopus leg. She looked up and saw no tentacles—the damage was so great, it had knocked the boss down. Maple figured this was her chance and redeployed, flying to the surface.

“*Gasp!* Okay, gotta be quick!”

She hastily put her equipment back on and braced herself, determined not to get dragged under again.

The octopus recovered and swung a tentacle, scraping along the ground, water spraying everywhere.

“Zone Freeze! Predators! Hydra!”

The first of these skills caught the tentacle just before it hit her. While it was frozen still, Maple hit it with a blob of poison, then she and her monsters started gnawing away at it. The more she ate, the better it tasted. Maybe the explosion had cooked the surface, or maybe Hydra had given it a spicy sauce—either way, the flavor was definitely improving.

Maple was starting to lose track of her real objective. She raised her shield and blasted off, flying right into the main tentacle cluster.

“Whoa! I *severed* it!”

Maple's Devour was strong enough that it cut a tentacle clean off, leaving the loose end rolling on the ground. And that made the other tentacles go limp, lying flat in the shallows.

Assuming this was an opportunity, Maple charged in. She kept her shield raised and sliced off one tentacle after another each time she landed a hit. Her self-destruct flight didn't allow for fine control, but she was great at flying dead ahead.

Before the octopus revived, she'd chopped off every tentacle. Then a huge mist cloud appeared before her, and the main octopus body crawled out—just like the tentacles had before it.

“Yes! It's come out of hiding! Now...”

Maple went trotting over to the mouth and shoved all her guns in —fully aware that was its weak point. Once again, bullets tumbled around the interior, doing more and more damage. Meanwhile, Maple and her Predators were munching away on the legs.

“Mmph, *gulp*. These are way better than I expected. Wonder if I can take the severed tentacles back home.”



Maple glanced up and saw the octopus's HP bar was almost empty. This boss didn't seem to have another phase. Or maybe her attacks from within had taken the fight out of it.

"All right! Well then, let's finish with—"

Maple stopped firing just before it died and took one last bite out of its leg. The octopus burst into light, leaving only the severed tentacles behind. Maple looked them over, wondering if Iz could cook them into something nice.

But they started spraying black mist, and they were shrinking. They definitely weren't too big to eat anymore. Looking disappointed, Maple gathered them all up anyway.

"Looks like I got a skill!"

She opened her menu and looked up the new addition.

Lure of the Deep

Bind or attack a foe to paralyze them.

Bind time lasts longer the greater your STR advantage.

"Cool! Eh-heh-heh. Well, gotta try it out. Uh...Lure of the Deep!"

But she didn't have enough MP, so nothing happened. She thought about this for a while, then decided to use one of her shield's skill slots. Devour had a daily limit but didn't actually require MP—that meant she wasn't taking advantage of the five-a-day no-MP skill activations that Night's Facsimile allowed. Lure of the Deep could fix that oversight in style. There was nothing she could do about her lack of STR, though.

"Okay...one more try!"

Maple used the skill again, and her arm and shield turned into two-yard-long navy-blue tentacles. They gave off a black mist and were clearly not anything that should be attached to *her*. And since she'd put it on her shield, the shield was a part of them, too. No trace of the shield's original shape had been left behind—it was all wriggly, wormy coils.

"Ugh...maybe I shouldn't have eaten this one."

Figuring she should at least try it out, she hopped on the exit circle, leaving the cave. Back on the island she'd come from, Maple put her snorkel on and sent her tentacles after some fish.

"Does it paralyze them?"

She moved her arm, and the wound-up tentacles opened, wrapping themselves around the fish.

"Nice catch!"

Maple yanked on the tentacles, and fish trapped in them vanished into thin air. Maple pulled her tentacle arm out of the water, but there was no fish to be found.

This skill was set to her shield. Before any paralysis could kick in, the shield gave her tentacles the Devour effect. The same daily limit was still in place, but the sight of her tentacles wrapping around things and swallowing them whole was entirely removed from anything human.

“H-how do I tell everyone?”

Maple couldn't see a way to make this seem palatable. She thought about it awhile longer but eventually just told them the unvarnished truth.

750 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

Y'all tame a monster yet?

751 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

Still looking.

Don't wanna start raising one, then find something better, that's just sad.

752 Name: Anonymous Archer

People already finding rare monsters with forgiving conditions.

753 Name: Anonymous Mage

It's mostly animal types, but I want like, a rocky golem.

754 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

Half our guild's found some.

755 Name: Anonymous Archer

Did Maple get a second one?

756 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

No, but also yes.

757 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

Clear as mud. What is it?

758 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

A terrifying tentacle.

759 Name: Anonymous Mage

Cannot accept

760 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

It's...less that she tamed it than...made it part of her. It's her arm now.

761 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

Not something most would choose.

762 Name: Anonymous Mage

Did she get a midpoint between her human and monster forms?

763 Name: Anonymous Archer

Are we not sure which is the real her?

I get that.

I mean, how much humanity could she really have left?

764 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

It definitely looks half-human, half-monster.

As for what it does—find out in the next event!

765 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

But given Maple's stats, if she grabs you, you could probably get away.

766 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

She has no STR.

767 Name: Anonymous Archer

But if you saw a girl's arm go full tentacle, 100% your brain would freeze up.

No one would dodge the first grab.

768 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

Can confirm.

769 Name: Anonymous Mage

This area isn't supposed to feature any absorbing monsters.

770 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

By the next event, Maple's gonna be a chimera.

771 Name: Anonymous Archer

Monsters in town is one thing but hauling the last boss around?

772 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

No one's tamed her, but she just keeps growing.

Does she feed on tentacles?

773 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

She brought some tentacles back with her and we made takoyaki.
They were spraying black mist...

774 Name: Anonymous Mage
WHY would you *eat* that?!

None of them knew Maple had eaten the tentacles while the octopus still lived.

A few days after Maple's tentacle reveal, the three guild members without pets were at their guild home, trying to make up their minds.

"I spend a lot of my time filling the gaps in our lineup. Rather than something specialized, I'd want a jack-of-all-trades. And I *do* have a lead..."

Maple Tree's sole mage, Kanade, was playing with his Rubik's Cube-shaped wand as he talked. He was a versatile player, and it would be tough for a pet to keep up with him. That made taming a rare monster essential for him.

"I'd want something with recovery skills. We don't really have a specialized healer. I'm following a likely quest, so once that wraps up..."

Like Maple, this speaker carried a great shield—Chrome. Unlike Maple, his combat style usually involved taking lots of damage, with liberal use of recovery skills to keep him alive. By finding a pet that played into that build, he hoped to become even more durable.

"I'm still looking for a crafting pet. They can't all be combat focused! I bet word starts getting around soon."

Iz was the guild's dedicated crafter and had spent her time on this floor making items to help everyone else explore. She'd yet to venture out much herself. But since she knew exactly what she was looking for, it would likely take her a lot less time to dig up relevant info.

Either way, all three of them were searching for pets that played into their greatest strengths.

And hopefully they'd each wind up with a range of options to choose from. On top of that, in the next event, Maple Tree would be up against the best guilds in the game: the Order of the Holy Sword and Flame Empire. They'd need pets with the potential to stand against mighty foes. That was making them all hesitant to settle.

"It'll be easier for us to plan once everyone's got a pet. I'll try and wrap my thing up today," Chrome said, standing up.

Since everyone wanted something different, they had to go their separate ways. It would be a while yet before they could tackle this stratum as a team.

"Have fun. I'm gonna scour the town," Iz said.

"Same. I might stumble on a likely quest."

All three left the guild home and headed out.

“But...not like I’ve got any clue where to go.”

Kanade was out on the town alone. It wasn’t exactly a small place, and he was just aimlessly looking for anything out of the ordinary.

NewWorld Online had a habit of tying newly added quests to new NPCs.

Kanade remembered the faces of every NPC he’d passed.

He was also comparing that information with existing intel on quests and NPCs. This made it easy to spot anyone new.

Today was just another routine check. But since the seventh stratum itself had only recently been added, he wasn’t exactly expecting to stumble across anything the way Kasumi had.

“...Or not?”

Kanade had been walking along, humming, sure he’d get nowhere—and caught a glimpse of a man out of the corner of his eye. A standard-issue cloak, a longsword, and a buckler—typical light armor. An unremarkable NPC design.

But Kanade had never seen him before. He had every face memorized, so this forgettable-looking face unexpectedly stood out to him.

“Guess I should follow him? Not like I had other plans.”

He abandoned his rounds and started following the man.

The NPC also seemed to be simply making the rounds, with no real purpose. Kanade wasn’t discouraged. He maintained a set distance, following along.

After a while, the man suddenly ducked down a deserted ally and into a house. Kanade followed after, easing the door open.

“Where’d he go...?”

He’d definitely seen the man enter, so there must be a reason for this disappearance.

“I’ve been logging in a lot, so I was sure this was something...”

But there was always a chance he’d simply never bumped into the dude before.

Still, Kanade’s instincts were telling him this was a real lead. He poked around the home’s interior awhile without finding anything. Eventually, he settled down on a chair.

“*Sigh*...I was so sure I had something.”



He got back to his feet and reached for the doorknob.

“.....Guess not,” he muttered.

And stepped outside.

“Yeah, right,” he added, spinning around and heading back in.

There was a *reason* it felt off, and he wasn’t about to leave until he figured out what. He’d been hyperfocused on the room behind him as he left and had picked up a faint sound as the door opened.

“Hmm...”

Back inside, Kanade found everything just as it had been. A table, chairs, a bed, bookshelves. But his sharp mind caught a single book out of place.

“That must be it.”

He touched the spine, and the book lost shape, folding in on itself and turning into a slime, which raced away from him.

“Finally found one. The intel I got from the town library sure came in useful.”

Kanade had been looking for this exact monster—a slime that could mimic anything flawlessly. And discovering it triggered a quest.

Mirror Image

To clear the quest, defeat the mirror slime.

“Mirror Image, mm? I like it.”

Naturally, Kanade accepted the quest and left the house, heading out into the field. The description might not name the place, but he knew where he was going. It was one of the places on the list of promising locations—a cave filled with crystals with faces so smooth they were like mirrors.

“Let’s just hope it can do what I want it to.”

He hadn’t fought much lately and had a solid stock of grimoires. He set out to find this monster and take it down.

When he reached the crystal cave, he deployed his bookshelves, ready to fight at a moment’s notice. Searching for the slime, he headed farther in. If the hint he’d found was right, it would be here somewhere.

The cave itself was not all that large, but since it was made entirely of reflective crystals, it was like a fun house and extremely difficult to navigate.

...At least it would’ve been for anyone without Kanade’s remarkable mind. He immediately identified the route forward, and

his grimoires made short work of any monsters along the way.

“.....There it is.”

Kanade had reached the back via the shortest route. It looked empty—but seeing through the slime’s disguise was a trivial task for him.

The crystal face stopped showing his reflection, melting back into the slime’s own form and then into a new shape. No longer translucent, it added colors and details.

“Interesting,” he muttered. “Shape-shifting takes longer than I’d imagined.”

The slime in front of him now looked exactly like Kanade—like a mirror held up before him.

And behind it floated bookshelves packed with grimoires.

Kanade remembered the doppelgängers Maple and Sally had fought during the second event.

“Let’s give this a try,” he said.

He pulled a book from the shelf, and the slime did the same. If they both had the same skills, then victory would go to whichever made the best use of them. Kanade knew every book in his stacks. One glance at the spine told him what spell, what cast time, and what area it would affect. No matter what the slime picked, he instantly knew how to handle it and could avoid getting hit.

Like Kasumi’s Mind’s Eye, Kanade always knew where the threat lay.

“Magic Bullet Inferno. Reaper’s Cry.”

In his guise, the slime drew two grimoires—a spell that cast fire projectiles with a homing property and an AOE instant-death spell.

“Mm, Anti-Sorcery Barrier! Blessed Vestments!”

Kanade knew what those spells were before they activated and put out a powerful barrier that only stopped magic and a shroud of light that gave him a continuous resistance to death spells. The fiery projectiles burst on the barrier, and the wails of the reapers faded into the light.

“Going straight for the rare draws, mm? Gonna be tough to stay choosy.”

Kanade’s skill gave him a large library of grimoires, but they were all single use. He wanted to preserve his stock for the next event, but the slime had no such restrictions. Best to physically dodge what he could and only use a defensive spell when absolutely necessary.

“But at least it isn’t too clever with them? No, that doesn’t make it better.”

Trading spells from a distance would get him nowhere, so Kanade closed in. Giant waves, ground faults, and lightning pelted him.

“Mana Flight! Might Minimizer! Anti-Magic!”

The first spell lifted his feet from the ground, wafting him over the fault with a burst of speed. The wave and lightning he soaked with a pair of spells that reduced damage.

As long as he survived the hit, Blessed Vestments would heal him back up. That was an exceedingly rare skill, and the heal was quite powerful.

He forced his way through the wave, and the flight spell ran out, dropping him back on the ground. The slime was already pulling out more grimoires. A field of ominous flowers coated the floor, chains dropped from the sky, and a blizzard gusted in from the fore.

“Wish I could just go wild with them, too. All-Resist, Firestorm, Summon: Decoy.”

Kanade was still closing in, the first spell defending against the poison flower’s deadly pollen, a heat wave melting the blizzard’s snow, and a decoy baiting away the chains.

His lag-free counters now had him right on top of the slime.

“Yeah, I figured you weren’t that smart.”

Kanade pulled out a bunch of grimoires, shifting to the offensive. Every one of them was a top-class spell that ignored all attempts to reduce the damage with skills. The downside—no range, but he was close enough that didn’t matter.

“Breath of Ruination! Divine Punishment! Gravity Ax!”

Black fires, a flash of lightning, and an unseen ax that split the very ground—all scorching the slime. The defensive skills it used proved meaningless, and the slime vanished, leaving only a translucent core on the ground, almost as if it had gone into a state of rest. If it had been allowed to gain distance, the sheer range of defensive spells would have drawn this fight out for ages, so Kanade’s burst-damage strategy had paid off.

“Whew...if it can copy me to this degree, it didn’t really need to *hide*. Lessee.”

He scooped up the core and checked the description. It said that activating fifty types of skill or magic would revive it as a pet.

“Fifty? Well, it did say it sought knowledge in books to better imitate other life-forms.”

That might sound like a lot, but for anyone who learned a lot of minor skills, it was a very achievable figure. In Kanade’s case, he didn’t even need to learn the skills. He simply used up fifty spells that seemed unlikely to be that useful in the future. A substantial loss of grimoires, but a necessary price for the pet he was looking for. When the last spell went off, the core melted and became a slime again.

And a Bonding Bridge appeared in Kanade’s hand—the same ring the other pet owners had.

That was the end of the quest. Kanade checked out his new

monster's stats.

Mirror Slime

Lv1 HP 200/200 MP 200/200

STR 10 VIT 20

AGI 45 DEX 50

INT 80

Skills

Mimic, Rest, Awaken

“Stronger than I’d expected. But I guess if it’s supposed to be seventh stratum ready, it better be this good.”

A twist in his favor. The next task at hand was to give it a name, like the girls had done.

“Lemme see...hmm... How about Sou? Come on, Mimic.”

Putting the ring on, he gave it an order. That was all it took for Sou to take on Kanade’s form. The grimoires in its stacks were a perfect match for his. The two Kanades were more identical than Mai and Yui—you couldn’t get more alike than being literally the same person. And both sported the exact same grin.

“Yeah, I like it! Ah, so the force of the skills is halved. Good enough. That’s not where my strength lies.”

He wasn’t surprised the pet version didn’t live up to the boss version. But it still doubled the number of grimoires he could use.

“Now I just have to see how much control I have—but we’ll find that out as it grows.”

Kanade was already imagining what sorts of attacks he could pull off and laughing to himself. Sou’s smirk was every bit as crafty.

“Okay, let’s see if there’s any info yet.”

Figuring other players would have scoured the town by now, Iz checked the info Sally had gathered. Once she’d read that over, she also swung by the town bulletin boards. She’d been so busy making all the new items that she’d only really left her workshop to gather crafting materials.

“Mm...any good pets?”

She looked over the data on tamable monsters, and there were a lot of types out there. Strong monsters that were easy to tame were starting to be a common sight around town.

“Even if they’re not rare, the stats are pretty good. I’m sure Sally’s looking into all of that, but...are there any with a crafting focus?”

She read further and found a monster that had only just been discovered.

The quest only showed up if you’d crafted a set number of the newly implemented items, so the player who’d discovered it had clearly been spending just as much time in their workshop as Iz.

The info said completing the quest would probably give you a spirit that looked like a tiny bead of light—but since no one had actually finished it, the spirit’s abilities were still unknown.

“Hmm, I like it. Let’s go with that.”

She’d done nothing but craft since the new stratum came online, so she was way over the quest’s requirement. Excited, Iz headed to the workshop where the quest began.

It didn’t take long for her to get there. The workshop looked like a normal home, but the chimney was oversized, and there was a mountain of crates and barrels by the side—all stuffed with materials. Through the window, she could see all kinds of crafting equipment.

“That’s the place. It said if you meet the condition, it just starts on its own...”

Iz opened the door and stepped in.

She found an old man with a magnificent white beard. As proof of his dedication to his craft, the house was filled with well-worn tools. As Iz soaked in the sights, the old man began to speak.

“If you’re here, you must be after the spirit’s power. Hmph... Well, it seems you know a thing or two. Wait right there.”

A blue screen popped up in front of Iz with the quest details.

Three Trials

To complete the quest, offer the three items listed, strengthened to the max, with the required abilities attached.

“I bet all three are pretty tough.”

But Iz accepted the quest anyway, waiting for the old-timer to speak again.

He pulled a sheet of paper out of a drawer and showed it to her. It had the names of three items inscribed upon it.

“Spirits are fickle creatures. With their aid, you can make magnificent things...but first, you must prove yourself worthy.”

And making these items to spec would prove you had the talent the spirit required.

“These are...mm. Got it.”

Iz nodded and left the house, vowing to return only when all three items were done. She'd been crafting since she got to the seventh stratum—yet she'd never heard of any of these before. The note she'd been given told her the recipes, but they were a regular crafting pyramid, requiring you to make two items and combine them into a third. This was gonna be a very involved process.

“Crafting them's not the problem, though...”

A lot of the materials that went into these items looked like they came from powerful monsters. A dedicated crafter like Iz would never be able to take them down.

“Gonna have to ask for help.”

She checked what guild members were online, but on her way back to the guild home, she spotted Maple and the Flame Empire's guild master, Mii, in the main square. They saw Iz, and Maple waved her over.

“Maple, how's it going? Any luck out there?”

“Totally! Mii asked me to come grind levels with her.”

“Oh, nice. But I guess I can't ask for help today, then...”

Maple's head tilted at that, and Iz filled her in on the quest requirements.

Maple clearly wanted to help, but she didn't want to cancel her plans with Mii, either. Mii picked up on that and put a hand to her lips, thinking—and once Iz finished explaining the quest, she offered a solution.

“Fascinating. Why not join us? It seems this quest takes you to some high-level areas, which means our interests are aligned.”

“You're sure, Mii?” Maple asked.

Mii gave her a wink that only she could see.

“Naturally,” she said. “Heh...it’s a good chance to see what my rivals can do now.”

Mii meant every word of that, but she *also* just thought it would be fun to help them out.

“I appreciate it,” Iz said. “I definitely wasn’t up to it alone. Obviously, I’ll help out in my own way.”

“I look forward to it.”

“Then let’s get going!”

Iz led the way, with Maple and Mii close behind. Their first destination—the volcano. No one in Maple Tree had really explored that area yet, so those materials were in short supply.

“It’s pretty far—wanna do an Atrocity run? Or take Syrup?”

“Fights on the way would slow us down, so Syrup might be better.”

But as they spoke, Mii stepped in.

“I know a better way,” she said. “Heh-heh...Maple no longer has sole dominion over the skies. Awaken!”

At this command, Mii’s ring glowed red, and a bird appeared on her arm, with a long tail and orange feathers. The tips of its wings burned with red flames—clearly, not the kind of bird found in the nearby forest.

“Wow! Is that your partner, Mii? That’s right, you said you wanted to show it off.”

“Interesting... Is that a phoenix?”

Maple was positively giddy and babbling about how cool it was. Looking very proud, Mii gave her bird an order.

“Ignis! Giganticize!”

With that, the phoenix grew large enough for three to ride on.

“This won’t take long. All aboard!”

Maple struggled to clamber on, so Mii gave her a hand. As she did, Maple whispered, “You’re excited.”

“Urp...I—I couldn’t wait to show it off! What do you think?”

“It’s *really* cool,” Maple said again.

Mii couldn’t stop grinning. Meanwhile, Iz clambered aboard, and Ignis took off, carrying them all to the volcano.

Being a bird, Ignis turned out to be *very* fast. It did not take them long to reach their destination. As it wheeled around the crater’s edge, all three peered over the side.

“The dungeon entrance is in there somewhere.”

“It is. I know it well. This is where I tamed my pet. Take us in, Ignis!”

Mii had her phoenix fly them down into the mouth of the volcano. They found a platform jutting out of the side and the narrow dungeon

entrance beyond.

“This is the place. It’s too small to ride Ignis through. We’ll have to walk from here.”

Mii set her bird down on the platform, and Ignis shrank to its original size.

“Um, what was it you needed?”

“A bunch of ore and plants along the way and the materials the lava dragon boss drops.”

“Oh? Plants grow *here*?”

“Probably not in the real world. These plants are red and easy to overlook, so keep your eyes peeled.”

Since Iz knew what she was after, she took the lead and they moved single file through the narrow cave. Maple had Martyr’s Devotion active, so they were completely safe. The dungeon was a real ant farm, with larger rooms connected by narrow offshoots. At the very back was a pool of lava and a dragon within.



“Mii, aren’t fire-type monsters tough for you?”

“A bit, yeah. But I don’t let that stop me. You’ll see.”

Iz was scurrying around, gathering ore and plants. Maple and Mii didn’t really have their gathering skills leveled—or have them at all—so had no chance of getting the rare materials Iz needed. They were on bodyguard duty.

As Iz was gathering at one post, they heard sparks flying, and several giant balls of fire flew their way. These were clearly alive because they opened their giant flaming maws and started shooting smaller balls of fire.

“Let’s clear those before they multiply. Flame Empress! Ignis, Fastened Flames!”

Seeing Mii fighting with her pet, Maple summoned Syrup and made it giant.

“Gotcha! Full Deploy! Hydra! Syrup, Spirit Cannon!”

Maple did her usual barrage plus poison spam. Since she was fighting great balls of fire, she opted for the high-damage Spirit Cannon over binding them with Syrup’s Mother Nature skill.

Next to her, Mii broke into a run, attacking with fireballs of her own.

Maple had teamed up with Mii before, so she could tell just what had changed.

Ignis was regularly sending flames into the air, and each time these linked with Mii’s fireballs, her entire body pulsed with a fiery orange aura, her DPS increasing. She was doing way more damage than Maple’s salvo, burning up even foes *made* of fire.

“Looks like my fires are stronger! Pyre! Blue Fire!”

Red-and-blue flames scorched the ceiling, leaving no trace of the fireballs behind. That did empty Mii’s MP tank—but it took out all the monsters without Maple really doing anything.

“Wow! You’re so strong!”

“Naturally. And you’re primarily a defensive player, Maple. It makes sense my DPS would start to outpace yours.”

“Urgh...that’s fair. I’ve been relying on Hydra since I was just starting out.”

Iz had finished gathering and been watching wide-eyed. Now that combat was over, she shook it off and came running up.

“That really was something else. Oh, have one of these. One of my specialty potions. Least I can do.”

“Mm, thanks. Appreciated.”

Mii drank the potion. One draft completely filled her MP back up, boosted her MP recovery, and provided a temporary magic damage boost. Mii saw how long this lasted and looked guilty.

“Uh, are you sure? This has to be worth a lot. I’ve never seen one last this long.”

“Like I said, *I* made it. And there’s more where it came from.”

“Ah...I guess you aren’t in Maple Tree for nothing.”

Mii remembered how Iz had kept her guild from running low on supplies in the fourth event.

“I’m mostly on support, so it’s not often I get lumped in with our big stars.” Iz laughed.

It was hard to miss how freakish everyone else was, but the items they used and the bombs that claimed so many lives in the fourth event—those all came from Iz. She made it sound like she couldn’t fight at all, but with items boosting her and bombs exploding everywhere, she could blow up more than her fair share of monsters and players.

“Either way, this will make clearing this area a breeze. Don’t have to worry about MP *or* HP.”

As long as they were in range of Martyr’s Devotion, nobody ever lost HP. And Iz’s potions kept her MP topped up. Mii was normally a glass cannon with poor fuel economy, but not today.

“We’ll let Mii do the fighting.”

“Yeah, I’ll take us right up to the boss.”

Mii seemed to have the layout down, so she led the way, pausing only when they found a gathering spot. Like she said, every monster here was fire element, but she took them out so fast you’d never even know they resisted her spells.

And they reached the dungeon depths.

A glowing lake of lava spread out before them, jets of it spraying from the land all around.

“Urgh, we can’t walk there without taking damage, right?”

“No, there’s no fixed damage here. Just...really strong monsters.”

In the last event, Maple had run across similar-looking terrain that did a set amount of damage no matter your defense, and she had *not* appreciated it. But Mii promised there was no such gimmick here. Maple looked relieved.

“This is the place. Brace yourselves!”

“Okay!”

“Ready!”

Mii pulled out her fireballs, Maple leveled her artillery guns, and Iz readied her bombs. Just as they got ready, the lava rose up and burst—and a massive black dragon emerged, lava dripping off every inch of it. This time it wasn’t just Mii charging in; Maple and Iz advanced on either side. With a boss, you needed all the damage you could get.

“Here’s *my* new move! Lure of the Deep!”

When going straight ahead, Maple's rockets were faster than Mii. She was aimed right at the dragon's head as it emerged, but the sight of her arm turning into mist-spraying tentacles made Mii's eyes pop out of her head.

"Haaah!"

Maple's tentacles unwound like some great beast's yawning maw, all five of them wrapping around the dragon's head and binding it. From inside the tentacle vise, a stupendous amount of damage sparks burst as the dragon's HP dropped like a stone.

The damage Maple did hadn't changed—but previously she'd struggled to land more than one Devour hit at a time. Now each tentacle activated it separately, so she was landing five hits in a single instant.

She couldn't really do much with the binding or paralysis effects, but this? This was a game changer.

"Maple! One more! Detonate!"

Her attack done, Maple started falling, and Mii slipped in, blasting her back upward.

Maple righted herself in the air, and her tentacles shot out again.

"Grahhhh!"

"That won't work!"

The dragon's mouth opened wide, and it fired a heat ray, but the Devour tentacles swallowed that up and then gnawed on its face again. The burst of damage sparks looked just like the heat ray.

"I'm thinking...less bombs, more this!"

Iz grabbed an item from her pouch, tossing a few vials near Mii. They shattered, and magic circles appeared on the ground, providing an area effect that boosted the might of Mii's spells.

"Perfect...Spell Boost! Chain Fire! Ignis, c'mere!"

Mii used a buff of her own, then jumped aboard Ignis, swooping around the boss's back. Mii knew it had a weak point there.

She landed on the dragon's back, slamming her Flame Empress fireballs into it, Fastened Flames steadily buffing her flames, and Chain Fire stacking on top.

"Ignis! Phoenix Ignition! Crimson Combustion!"

Ignis's own fires ignited the dragon's back, the damage sparks spraying as high as the flames themselves. The dragon let out an agonized roar.

When MP cost was no concern, the DPS Mii could deliver was not to be trifled with, doing damage on par with Maple's quintuple Devour.

Staggering from all the damage, the dragon tried to recover and fight back, but Martyr's Devotion nullified all its blows, and Iz was throwing out MP recovery potions on top of the initial vials, so Mii

never had to slow down.

“This should do it!”

Summoning fires brighter than the lava itself, Mii incinerated the volcano’s master.

With combat complete, Iz ran off to collect the boss’s drops. Mii took advantage of that opening to pounce on Maple.

“Wh-what was that thing?!”

“Eh-heh-heh, I told you I had stuff to show off, too!”

“Yeah, you did, but...I didn’t expect *that*!”

From Mii’s perspective, it was just a new ridiculously high damage attack. It actually wasn’t that different from what Maple always did, but the wild visuals made that difficult to determine.

“I wanted to try it on a boss. I guess it’s my new ultimate move!”

“You bet! Augh, and here I thought your DPS was starting to lag behind...”

“Well, you let Ignis cut loose, so I wanted to show a thing, too.”

Maple’s smile was so cheery Mii couldn’t help but smile back.

“We’ve gotta figure out how to handle you before the next guild war—offensively *and* defensively.”

“Heh-heh-heh, I’ll be ready! Everyone else’s getting really good, too.”

“I figured...and experienced it.”

Mii glanced toward Iz.

She’d been convinced Maple Tree lacked a strong buffer, but clearly that opinion needed updating. Frankly, Iz’s items were noticeably better than any other support character she’d encountered.

As they chattered, Iz finished collecting what she needed, and they headed out to the next destination.

“Where to?”

“I need roc eggs from the cliff face and frozen flowers from the snowcapped peaks. Coral from the ocean, poison from a scorpion... and several furs.”

Iz was running down her recipes, listing off the rare ingredients—far more of them than Maple had expected.

“This sounds tough... What do they make?”

“None of them have a practical use. The quest is testing Synthesizing with a potion, Smithing with a sword, and Sewing with some clothes.”

Once she completed these items, they’d be inventory exclusive, useless for anything else.

But each was nigh impossible to complete without total mastery of crafting and a bracing challenge even for dedicated crafters. This quest was extremely high difficulty.

“This is definitely gonna be a long-term objective. No way we get everything today.”

“Well, I’m always happy to help!”

“Yeah, feel free to call me in if I’m available. Should we prioritize areas where Ignis gives an advantage?”

“Sounds like a plan—which I guess means those cliffs?”

“Excellent suggestion.”

Mii had Ignis wheel around, and they flew off toward the cliffs.

Iz spent the next few days racing all around the map, gathering ingredients.

Tamed Monsters Defense Build and

CHAPTER 6

Like the rest of the guild, one man was out roaming the field, searching for the perfect pet.

His name was Chrome.

“This way next? Man, this goes on forever.”

He was peering at the map in hand. This was no ordinary in-game map—it led to *treasure*.

This was the quest line Chrome was following. A map found in one dungeon led to another dungeon, and a rare drop in that dungeon gave him a map to the location...of the next map. It continued on like that for quite a while. X marked the spot for over a dozen locations already.

Each time, he'd found a few treasure items that could be sold for cash, but there was still no sign of a tamable monster.

And these maps were leading him to increasingly secluded jungles or distant mountain peaks, making it hard to tackle more than one a day.

“It's gotta be almost over...”

This time, he was headed to a cave on the coast. The sight of the ocean brought to mind Maple's tentacles.

“I'd prefer something a little less alarming, visually... Oh, is that it?”

The entrance was normally underwater and the cave occupied by vicious sharks—but at the right time of day, the tides left the entrance exposed. Chrome's previous trip had been enough to figure out *when* that was, and this time, he was prepared to explore it properly.

“Bad footing. And the inside...looks real dark. Well, here goes nothing.”

Chrome put a lantern on his hip and carefully picked his way forward, shield at the ready.

He passed heaps of bones in the rags of their clothes. This looked a lot like the mystery cave Maple had described.

“If it's a ghost type, I can't exactly bring it home...”

Even if it was a great pet for him, if it terrified Sally, it would just hurt Maple Tree's effectiveness as a whole.

“Crap, it might really be one,” he muttered, raising his shield.

His lantern had caught rusty axes and sabers in fleshless hands. The skeletons approached, bones rattling.

“But in a narrow spot like this, mobs ain't a problem.”

The cave was narrow enough that no matter how many foes

spawned, they could only attack one at a time. All he had to do was block and slice.

No need to take them down with a single hit—just use the terrain to ensure he took no damage.

“Whew...definitely seems like an undead theme.”

It was too soon to judge the entire dungeon. Chrome pinned his hopes on what lay ahead and moved farther in.

“Geez, how many are there?”

Chrome was leaning against a wall, exhausted.

Like he'd feared, this dungeon was packed to the brim with skeletons, soldiers, and other spooky staples. None of them were very strong individually, so even when Chrome did take damage, his healing could easily keep up.

“I was planning on asking Sally for help, but good thing I didn't invite her today. I should be pretty far along by now.”

There had been some forks along the path, so he couldn't be sure he was heading the right way. But since he hadn't run into any dead ends, there was no reason to turn back.

“Ugh, more already? I can't even catch my breath...”

Scythe-sporting specters and spear-stabbing skeletons were coming his way.

“All right! Stimulation! Shield Attack!”

Chrome knocked several skeletons back, then slammed his cleaver down on them. As he swung, one of the ghosts got behind him, slicing his back, but he ignored the damage and continued raining more blows on the monsters.

Stimulation was the skill Chrome had used his medals on.

It was an extremely basic personal healing boost, but in Chrome's case, that not only affected Battle Healing's automated healing but also Soul Eater, which healed him for every downed enemy, as well as Life Eater, which healed on every attack, and also Soul Syphon, which activated every time he successfully guarded.

The result? Even if a single ghost attacked him with impunity, and as long as he was still hitting the monsters in front of him, he'd never go down. A different kind of resilience from Maple's, but it helped him dominate against any foes that did chip damage.

Eventually, he turned around and blocked the phantom's scythe with his shield—which topped his HP up.

“Last one!”

He swung his cleaver, struck home, and felled the final monster.

“...Whew.”

The cave fell silent again. Chrome put his blade away and headed farther in.

Every so often, there was another battle but no new monster types, so he just methodically worked through them.

"It's taking me a while, but I'm steady as a rock. Definitely a good skill choice."

Chrome was a great shielder at heart, and minimal DPS suited him just fine. Maple's damage output was far from normal.

"...Oh, it's opening up. Is that...?"

This must have been an inlet once because there was a pool of salt water in the back but dry land on his side. A ship was bobbing on the water. It was in such a state of disrepair it probably shouldn't be floating.

"I see where this is going."

Chrome nodded once—and purple flames appeared on the skip's deck. There was a bloodcurdling wail, and three gangways extended from the side, allowing a skeletal horde to pour onto the shore.

"A pirate ship...or a ghost ship? Really not something you're supposed to solo."

But he wasn't planning on going down easy. He started with an Iz potion that provided a constant healing effect, then buffed himself as far as his items could take him.

"Let's find out which of us is tougher!"

He drew his cleaver, braced his shield, and grinned.

The ghost ship's cannons boomed—and the fight began.

"Stimulation! Guard Aura!"

Boosting his healing and defense, he blocked the cannonball with his shield. But the flames billowed around it, whittling away at his HP. Better than a direct hit, but it still hurt.

"Tch, blocking ain't enough?"

Since there were at least thirty skeletons advancing on him, he activated Battle Healing. Iz's potion helped his health refill nicely.

"Reaper's Mire!"

At his call, inky goop started dripping off his cleaver. This skill added extra damage to each attack and would allow him to get through the mob faster. Chrome started working through the skeletons one at a time, but there were a *lot*, and they were coming at him from all sides. Unable to handle all of them, he noticed his HP was in steady decline.

"Damn, this cannon's killing me...argh!"

When he raised his shield to block the cannonade, the ghosts behind all hit him with their strongest blows, and his HP ran out.

But Dead or Alive kicked in. A skull appeared behind him, and he survived with a single hit point.

"Rock on! Luck's with me today! Gimme some HP!"

The first time he died, either Dead or Alive or Indomitable

Guardian would activate—he could *always* survive one death blow.

Which meant he could play more aggressively, relying on defeating enemies to restore his health. And if Dead or Alive kicked in, that saved Indomitable Guardian for later, allowing him to stay on the offensive.

Certain he'd survive, he continued mowing down skeletons and ghosts—but their number remained steady.

“This is getting me nowhere! Come on out, boss!”

The mob he was fighting came in a range of sizes, with a variety of weapons, but their real strength lay in numbers, and they clearly weren't the main attraction.

Reinforcements had just descended onto dry land, so Chrome took out an item and forced his way through the mob around him, moving to the vacated gangway.

“Gotta get on board before the next adds arrive!”

He slipped through a broadside, grabbed the ship's rail, and climbed on deck with his HP intact.

There he found a skeleton in a gaudy coat and armor, sporting a pirate's hat and wielding a sharp-looking saber. Clearly a tougher foe than the others—but no tamable mark by its HP bar.

“Well, good. Now I can quit worrying and kick your ass! Flame Slash!”

Chrome charged in, his cleaver on fire. The boss's saber matched it, wreathed in purple flames.

They traded blows, but with a great shield and HP recovery skills, Chrome had the advantage in any damage race. He could survive in the middle of a mob, but his true worth showed in a one-on-one duel. As he carved the boss's health down, the skeleton mob tried to scramble back up the gangway.

“I already handled that!”

To keep his one-on-one advantage, he needed ways to keep enemies from piling on.

That item he took out earlier? One of Iz's special land mines, perfect for defending a narrow gangway.

The explosion was every bit as powerful as the ship's cannons and sent dozens of skeletons flying. The ghosts escaped the blast's radius and came floating his way, but Chrome just went after the boss even harder.

“Spirit Light!”

This skill briefly negated all damage, allowing him to ignore the ghosts entirely and focus on laying down the hurt. He parried the boss's saber with his shield, and his cleaver slashed across the boss's bony throat. The skull went flying—and the skeletons collapsed in heaps, the ghosts fading away. The eerie purple fires went out, and

the inlet was quiet once more.

“Whew, that captain was no real threat. But let’s hope he had a treasure!”

Chrome left the battered deck, heading into the ship interior. He checked each room in turn and found one laden with cargo. Most of it was badly deteriorated or already open—but there was a single box still tightly lidded.

“...No monsters around.”

He approached cautiously and tapped the lid with his cleaver. Didn’t seem to be a mimic, so he opened the lid.

Inside was a heap of weapons and armor, packed in with gold coins—nearly all stuff designed to be sold off, so Chrome happily shoved it into his inventory.

“But this...”

He picked up a ring off the pile of coins. He’d recognized it at once—it was the same kind of ring Maple had loaned him when he borrowed Syrup.

“Might as well try it on.”

It seemed weird he hadn’t seen a monster, but he changed up his gear—and the room filled with the sound of something rattling.

“Wh-what? Uh...hmm.”

The sight before him was hard to believe.

It was like a poltergeist in action. The armor itself was floating. Arms, helm, sword, and shield, all hovering in midair on their own—which was a *kind* of monster.

He tried tapping on it, and it didn’t seem hostile. When Chrome took a step away, it clanked after him.

“So you’re linked to this ring?”

He checked the abilities, and the MP and HP weren’t too high—and neither were the stats.

“Skills are just the standard ring ones...and Polterguard?”



Figuring it was worth a shot, he had it activate the skill. The armor and sword floated onto Chrome, strengthening his current equipment. His weapon grew larger and sharper. His armor and shield sturdier. Chrome's new monster partner could equip itself to its owner.

"Oh! Interesting!"

Chrome had been searching for a monster that healed because that would allow him to stay on the front lines longer. If this monster strengthened all his equipment, boosting all his stats and survivability, that was ideal. And since it was armor, the skills it would learn were likely all defensive, too. Chrome grinned happily and looked the armor over again.

"Technically a ghost type, but I'll likely be fighting with it on me—so I *think* Sally can handle it."

That's what he told himself anyway. He decided to wrap things up for the day and left the dungeon, wondering what he should name the monster.

A while after partnering with the armor, Chrome arrived at the guild home to find Kanade wobbling his partner, Sou.

"Oh, Chrome! Look at Kanade's pet monster!" Maple cried, looking even happier than the boy himself.

Chrome was glad to see Kanade had tamed something at last and gave the slime a look over.

"A slime, huh? Interesting."

"Sou's more than meets the eye," Kanade said. "It just looks like this because it can't use skills in town."

Sou melted onto the floor, then firmed up and started rolling around. Mai and Yui gave chase, trying to catch it.

"Sure does up the fun factor."

"Wait, that's a ring! Chrome, you found a friend?" Sally said.

Chrome scratched his head. "Yeah, uh...it's a bit different. Sally—fair warning."

"Wh-what?" she said, no clue why he'd be singling her out.

"My partner's an empty suit of armor."

That was enough for her to catch his drift, and she twitched once and then went very still.

"No, um. That should be fine. Armor is, you know...cool."

She shifted uncomfortably, but Chrome decided it was safe enough and summoned his monster.

"Okay, Necro. Come on out!"

This was the armor's new name. As if pulled by invisible strings, the pieces clanked into place in the air. Other than the floaty factor,

Necro just looked like normal bits of armor, plus a sword. Sally had put a brave face on, but it took her a moment to look...and then she let out a sigh of relief.

“Yeah, I’m good. But that means there *are* undead pets...urgh.”

Fleeing reality, she had carefully avoided confirming that. But part of her had always known. Now she just had to hope her constant rival, Frederica, didn’t stumble on any bright ideas.

“This thing’s really interesting. Once we’ve all got our monsters, I’d love to try it out...”

“But first we need some levels. My pet’s still so low level it barely knows any skills.”

“Mm, good point. Is Iz our last holdout?”

Chrome looked around, but there was no sign of her.

“Oh, she’s still crafting like crazy. Hasn’t left her workshop.”

“Sally and I both helped her gather the materials... It was a long haul.”

“Yeah, and she’s gonna use the whole stack.”

They made it sound like a doozy, and Chrome cast a worried glance toward her workshop—

—just as it opened, letting Iz stagger out.

“W-wow...are you okay over there?”

“Mm? Oh, Chrome. You’re back. I...I’m done! Somehow.”

She must have been really going at it. She looked ready to fall asleep on her feet. Iz slapped her cheeks, stretched, and headed out to finish her quest. She looked tired—but extremely pleased with herself.

“I’ll just go turn these items in.”

“Expecting great things.”

Everyone cheered her out the door, and Iz headed to the quest giver’s house.



“Here we go.”

Iz stepped into the house and took out the required items. A bottle of medicine that glittered, its colors shifting and changing. Fancy clothes, every inch covered in painstaking detail. A dress sword with a transparent blade, sheathed in a scabbard studded with jewels.

“Magnificent. With these, I’m sure it will lend you its aid. Come with me.”

Iz followed the old man into the house and down the stairs to the cellar. Though underground, the room was a garden, full of flowers—with a magic circle at the center, glowing with a soft blue light.

“Put this on your finger and step into the center. That should change your view.”

Iz did as she was told, donning the ring and stepping onto the circle. Blue light poured out of the ring, filling her vision.

She briefly closed her eyes, and when she opened them—she saw a white bead of light, with tiny little wings. Somewhere between a fairy and a spirit. Iz glanced around and saw several others—little blobs of blue in the water jugs and near the plants at her feet, ones with leaves or flower petals for wings.

“These are all spirits. The white is standard, but other powers take over depending on where they are. They have strong control over the land and magic.”

“I see...sort of like elemental spells? Gonna have to experiment.”

Iz named the white light before her Fey and headed back to the guild home with her new companion in tow.

Now that everyone had a partner, it was time for Maple Tree to test themselves.

While the others were busy leveling their pets, Sally was considering the options for the dungeon.

"If it demands a lot of skills, that'll show our weaknesses... This could work."

As she plotted, the front door slammed open, and Frederica burst in.

"Ah! At last! I finally caught you!"

"Urgh."

"Let's duel! You know the deal by now!"

Sally glanced at Frederica's finger, and that was definitely a Bonding Bridge there. Sally had been avoiding her rival, finding reasons to roam the map, but now she was cornered.

"No, uh...hmm..."

"What? Something got you worried?"

"Not worried, exactly..."

Frederica's grin definitely spelled trouble, but she clearly wasn't letting Sally off the hook. And Sally didn't want to admit that she was avoiding the fight purely on the off chance that Frederica's pet might be some scary undead.

Frederica was no stranger to the Maple Tree guild home and knew right where the training room was. She dragged Sally down the hall, even more wound up than usual. Sally gave up and put her game face on.

"Same deal as always, then."

The rules were simple. Fight until one of them had no health or gave up.

"Cool! Ha-ha, what should I try first?"

Frederica was clearly riling Sally up and enjoying it.

The countdown began. Sally focused more than ever, waiting in grim silence.

When the countdown hit zero, the duel began.

"Superspeed! Oboro, Fleeting Shadow! Shadow Clone!"

Sally immediately went into top gear, vanishing—and then reappearing as *five* clones. Startled by Sally's unusual aggression, Frederica braced for an attack.

"Multi—gah!"

"Rocket Spout! Oboro, Binding Barrier!"

One of the five Sallys was a Mirage. As it faded from view, a voice came from behind Frederica. Water gushed up from her feet, throwing the mage into the air. She tried to resist, but Oboro's skill stunned her, and she couldn't move.

"W-wait! Stopppp!"

"Quintuple Slash!"

Sally paid Frederica's pleas no heed. The mage could not defend herself as she fell, and a quick combo took out her entire health bar. Frederica landed on the ground with a thud and picked herself up, cheeks puffed out.

"You've *never* been that out for blood before!"

"...That's all in your head."

"All I wanted to do was show off my pet! Oh, I guess I don't need to do that in combat, really. I can do that right here!"

"Huh? Ah! No...wait!"

This time Sally's pleas were ignored. Frederica's ring glowed, and Sally squeezed her eyes shut, clapping her hands over her ears. A moment later, Frederica flicked her in the forehead, forcing her eyes open.

Sally found the mage grinning down at her, a little yellow bird on her head.

".....Huh?"

"This is my partner, Notes. Heh-heh-heh, what, you expecting something else?"

"Oh...! F-Fredericaaa!"

Realizing the mage had been teasing her the whole time, all Sally could do was turn beet red.

"This side of you is pretty cute. Even if the way you move in combat is positively inhuman."

Frederica's grin went from one ear to the other.

"Argh, I'll get you next time!" Sally growled.

"Just you try! I love a fair fight! I'm gonna make you concede defeat someday! And I promise Notes is strong."

But at this point, both heard the bleep of an incoming message and checked their inboxes—and found news about the next event.

There was a prelim round this time, in which points were awarded based on each player's survival time and number of monsters dispatched. These rankings decided the difficulty of the main event, and the higher you placed, the better the rewards you could earn. Since the prelims were solo events, players who'd tamed monsters had help and flexibility and a clear advantage.

"So the prelim's like the first event, plus monsters? And the main round's a PvE with time sped up. This could be a real challenge."

"And since they're counting your time, there's a survival motif. I

hope we can all place well in the prelims, but easier said than done.”

After a quick skim, Frederica braced for another duel—but got another message before they could.

“Ugh, it’s from Pain.”

“Mm? Event planning?”

“He says I shouldn’t show you too much. Argh, he knew I’d be here.”

“Makes sense. We might be up against each other again.”

“True. But he’s letting me decide how much is too much, so I’m doing this my way!”

“Ha-ha, I’m starting to pity Pain.”

They started up a second duel. They ended up going five rounds that day, and Sally won them all. But Frederica *was* following Pain’s advice and never once let Notes use any skills.

A while after her Frederica fight, Sally found herself in the guild home with Maple.

“So Frederica never showed me what her bird can do, but given what it looks like—I’m assuming it’s good at buffing or debuffing.”

“You think?”

“Just my best guess. I mean, compared to Mai and Yui’s bears, it’s doesn’t exactly look like a physical damage dealer.”

“Yeah, I guess birds do seem more like a support monster.”

“And Frederica says when the Order’s top four are working together, she’s constantly casting.”

“With monster pals, that could change!”

“Yeah. Extend their strengths—or compensate for weaknesses.”

Concluding there was no use speculating further, they went outside.

Their intel now covered the bulk of the new stratum’s map, but they hadn’t spotted anything they particularly wanted to do as a guild. No matter where you went, everything on this floor came back to taming monsters.

Sally had a summary of all that info, and they looked it over, trying to come up with a plan.

“Anywhere you want to go, Maple?”

“Um. I’ve been to the ocean, the woods, and the volcano. Um... somewhere pretty.”

“In the mood for tourism?” Sally chuckled. “In that case, wanna go see the sights?”

Her list was made up of all places good for grinding levels or where lots of things happened—so she closed that.

“Can we? That sounds great! This map is filled with beautiful scenery.”

Maple opened up a list of her own. It was the opposite of Sally's, focused entirely on having fun. Places with beautiful views or particularly adorable creatures.

"Ah-ha. But some of these are pretty far apart. We'll need transport."

"Some of these are hard to get to in my Atrocity bod. If we want speed, maybe a Sally ride?"

"I thought you'd say that, but I have something better."

".....?"

That grin was certainly promising, but Maple had no clue what it could mean. She followed Sally's lead.



Not long after...

"Oh! It's so fast!"

"Hang on tight, Maple! I'm sure you'd survive the fall, but..."

"Wooo!"

Maple and Sally were on a horse.

Maple was whooping it up, and Sally was enjoying the feel of the wind on her face.

Horses were a different category from tamable monsters—they were mounts, purely for getting around. They were found in the fields and could be broken in and kept at the stables in town. But riding one at all had a minimum DEX requirement, so Maple could only manage it when holding on to Sally.

"Riding tandem does slow it down, but I caught a good horse, so it's still pretty fast."

"Amazing, Sally! Thank you!"

"You're welcome. The ground's getting uneven, so don't fall off."

"I—I won't do that! Oh, turn right here."

"Got it!"

Sally steered the horse while Maple navigated. This took them to a broad open plain that stretched as far as the eye could see. They looked down at it from a plateau and beheld a river running through it, with countless tamable monsters.

"This area doesn't have any aggressive monsters and isn't good for leveling, but that makes it excellent for relaxing."

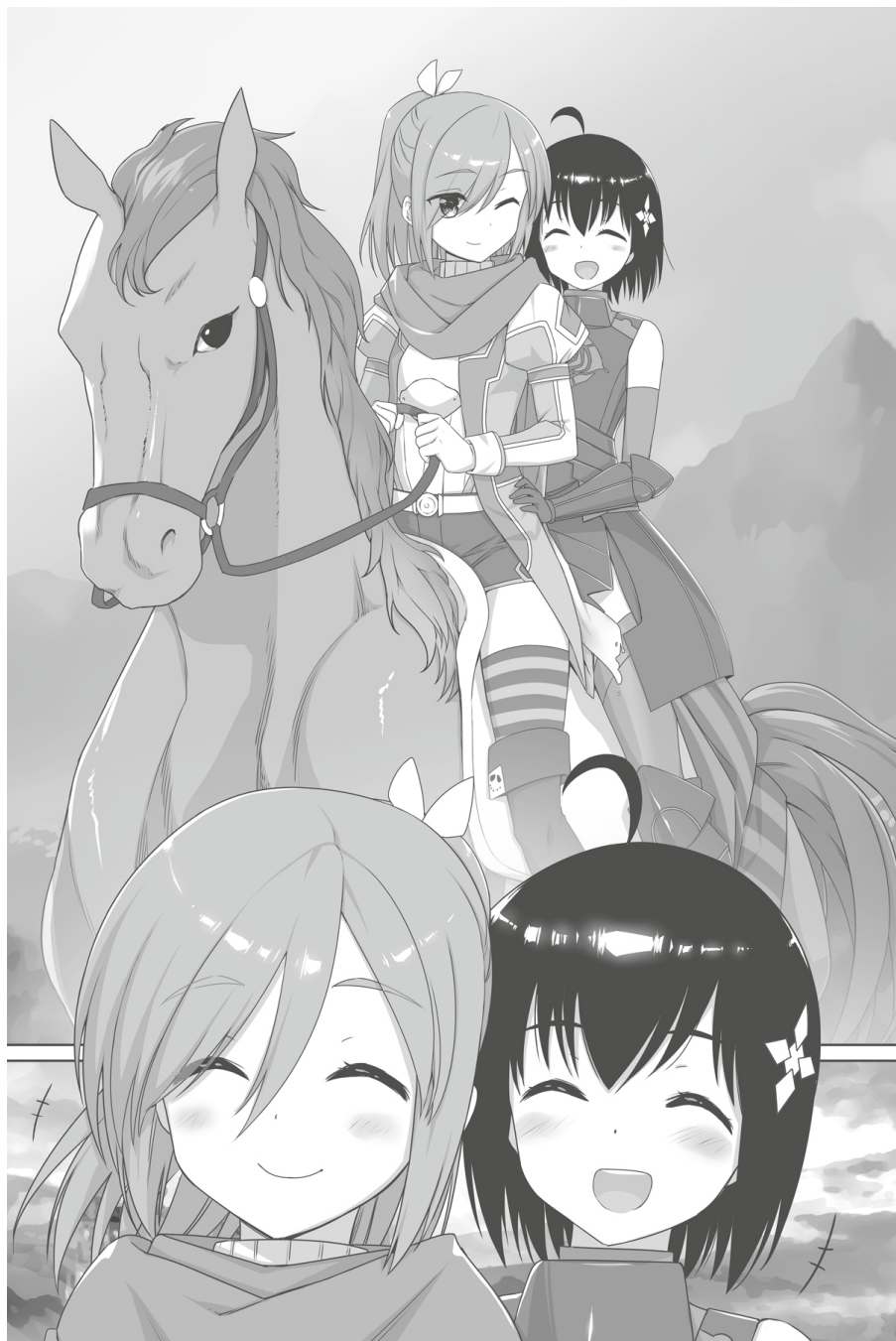
"You've been here before?"

"Nope, just the word on the street. But while I was still gathering info, everyone found a pet."

"I'm glad for them! They all found the perfect partners!"

They got off the horse and took a stroll. There were more horses like the one Sally had tamed, cows, water birds—all manner of

creatures.



“Aww, I wish I could bring them all home.”

“Would you have?”

“Probably not *all* of them, but I definitely want all the cute ones.”

“Ha-ha, I get that.”

There was no harm in having a cute monster pal. Maple settled for hugging Syrup tight.

“Worth keeping an eye out for rare monsters anyway. Most areas don’t have any, though.”

“But information is gold!”

“Don’t think anything’s gonna attack me here, so you go have fun.”

Maple was clearly eager to go running across this plain, and Sally was trying not to laugh. Maple seemed a little sheepish but soon dashed off, looking delighted.

“Mr. Bunny! Wait for meee!”

...*She’ll never catch those*, Sally thought, watching Maple chase after a colony of rabbits.

Sally enjoyed watching the monsters and gazing at the scenery in her own way.

Playing solo, she always found herself prioritizing efficiency, so kicking back Maple style was a nice change of pace.

There were fish swimming in the clear river waters and birds flitting about the skies overhead, but there was nothing particularly gamey going on.

“Hmm, nothing here. Just a place to find monster pets, huh? Yo, Maple?”

Wondering what Maple was up to, she called out. She heard Maple yell back, but there was no sign of her.

Puzzled, she checked her map and headed Maple’s way.

“Oh, I see.”

She eventually came upon several fluffy balls. These were a monster called a ball sheep, and just like their name implied, their wool coats were extremely round. Maple had Wooled Up in the middle of the herd, looking thoroughly content.

“You blended in so well I couldn’t see you.”

“Eh-heh-heh, I know, right? They do move around sometimes, but they roll me with them, so I can keep up!”

“You sure they’re not just stampeding into you?”

Maple was waving her over, so Sally picked her way carefully through the flock, trying not to startle any. She crawled into Maple’s wool—she was getting very used to that.

“It’s nice to just chill out sometimes!”

“Heh-heh, you always play like this.”

“Do I? It doesn’t feel like it.”

“Whoops, guess chill time’s over.”

Feeling the ball start to move, Sally burrowed farther in and used her webs to ensure she didn’t get tossed out.

“Martyr’s Devotion! Just in case.”

“Thanks.”

They finished just in time—the flock started racing across the open field.

And as they moved, Maple’s wool got kicked forward like a ball, spinning through the air.

They took no damage, but the centrifugal force made them pretty dizzy.

“Hey, Maple! This is some serious spinning!”

“Urp, the previous migrations were much slower...”

If Sally released her webs at the wrong time, she might well get thrown out and take damage, so her only option was to keep rolling.

After a while, there was a rustling sound—then they hit something, and Maple’s wool came to a stop.

“Urgh, so dizzy...”

“Yeah. Um. Sorry...let’s rest a bit before we get out.”

“I vote for that, too.”

They didn’t even know which way was up anymore, but once they settled down, they poked their heads out of the wool.

Nothing about their surroundings was even remotely familiar.

There was a little spring before them and trees all around.

The rustling sound they’d heard was the result of crashing through this dense vegetation. The ball sheep that brought them here were clustered round the spring, drinking water—clearly the reason for their migration.

“Guess we came pretty far.”

“Yeah, with all the spinning, I figured as much, but, uh...we’re not on the plain anymore. Which seems a little *too* far...”

“As big as that place was? Sheep are faster than I thought.”

They checked their maps, and they were well past the plains, in the forest beyond. A distance so great it felt like it should have taken a lot longer, even just charging straight ahead.

“Well, since they’ve brought us here, wanna look around?”

“Sure. In a relaxed way.”

Sally sheared Maple’s wool so she could move, and they headed to the spring.

“They don’t run when you get close. And I guess you can tame them.”

“But I can’t bring any home! Even though they’re fluffy and cute.”

Maple threw her arms around a ball sheep, rubbing against the wool—but the sheep’s round body started shaking.

“Whoa? Wahhhh!”

Maple was flung away, ruining her balance and making her stagger backward into the spring.

Surprised, the ball sheep ran off, and Sally moved to the water’s edge, using her Web Spinner skill to fish Maple out.

“You okay there, Maple?”

“Yeah, just caught off guard.”

Maple thanked her and was back on dry land. Sally frowned.

“You drop anything in the water?” she asked.

“Huh? Got my shield...and my sword...and my ring!”

“Maple, look there.”

Sally pointed at the spring, and Maple peered in. Something was glittering at the bottom.

“I can dive down and take a look. Be right back.”

Sally jumped in and came back with a glowing object in her hands.

“Phew.”

“Welcome back. Um. Is that a jewel?”

It was a ball made of something white and gemlike. The surface was smooth and did look like it was glowing.

“Guess we’ll check the item description.”

White Key

One of three keys for a very special door.

“...What door? And where?”

“No clue. But I bet the other keys look a lot like this—I mean, it says there’s two more.”

“Urgh, how do we find anything this small?”

“There must be a clue somewhere. Information leading you to this—we just happened to stumble on it.”

But the way they’d gotten here might *be* that clue.

“There are other types of monsters that migrate. If we’re looking for keys, we might start by checking them.”

“Agreed! If we find a second, it’ll prove we were right!”

“Yup. Welp, now we have a new goal...”

They continued their sightseeing tour, hoping to find more gem keys along the way.

“I guess we’ve gotta get back to the horse first.”

“Heh-heh-heh. That’s no problem at all. Watch this!”

Sally pulled a whistle out of her inventory and blew on it. A moment later, the horse emerged from the brush nearby.

“Oh! Wow! That’s all it takes?”

“Yup. No matter where you are, it’ll be there in seconds.”

“I’ve just been flying everywhere, so I never noticed, but are lots of people using them?”

“Yeah, they’re a good way to get around. More people are taming them all the time.”

They’d been added with the seventh stratum, which was great news for slow-footed players like Maple. Unlike tamed monsters, there was no limit on them, and since different types of horses got speed boosts in different areas, you might well need to match your breed to the task at hand.

“There are mobile monsters in plenty of areas. Where do we start?”

“Oh! There might be monsters like that in the ocean. I explored a lot there, so we might be able to narrow it down.”

“Nice—then let’s start there.”

Sally and Maple got on the horse and rode it through the woods.

“W-we won’t hit any trees, right?”

“Don’t worry; I’ve been practicing.”

Maple’s concerns proved unfounded, and the horse bounded over brush and wove through trees every bit as easily as if it was on an open plain.

“We’ll be there in no time!”

“Gotta use what the game gives us!”

They made it to the ocean without any collisions.

Remembering her prior explorations, she beckoned Sally to the water’s edge.

Since Sally had high Swimming and Diving skills, they could explore awhile without using Iz’s items.

“Careful, though. You never know when an octopus’ll show up.”

“The one you got your tentacles from? How was it?”

“...? Tasty even raw!”

Sally reached out and flicked Maple’s forehead.

“I mean how strong was it?!” she asked. “It grabbed you outta nowhere, right? Would I be in trouble if it did?”

“You might be in that cave. It was real narrow,” Maple said, looking a little embarrassed.

Sally would not normally let herself get caught, but if the capture gimmick was undodgeable, that might not hold true.

“Then let’s avoid the island you were on and have you stay above me with Martyr’s Devotion active.”

“Cool! I’ll be waiting up on Syrup!”

Maple put her snorkel on so she could keep an eye on Sally, then made Syrup giant and headed out to sea.

Once the water was deep enough, Sally dived off the turtle's back.

Maple kept watch, using Psychokinesis to keep her pet positioned overhead.

"Hmm..."

Sally made sure to keep within range of Marty's Devotion, searching for schools of fish.

The ocean floor was studded with colorful coral and filled with all manner of fish—including species you wouldn't ordinarily find in the same space. Every now and then, she saw gaps you could dive into, but this was hardly the time for blind exploration.

After swimming awhile, she located a school of tropical fish and dolphin-kicked her way over to them. Her Swimming skill was high enough that she could easily catch up.

".....!"

But that speed was too much for Maple.

Her skill's range was reasonably large, but not enough to keep Sally safe if she darted away.

Even now, there were fish with vicious fangs charging in and coral reaching up like tentacles to grab her feet.

Sally was aware she'd left Martyr's Devotion's glow but figured this was worth it. She sped up, evading the attacks and following the school. If a monster proved capable of keeping up, she used wind blades to take it out. Even underwater, she knew she could dodge almost anything.

She followed the tropical fish for a while, and they stopped looping over the same route—and dived into a gap in the coral.

Sally carefully approached, taking a light out of her inventory and shining it inside. The shadows of the fish made it hard to see much. It was clearly pretty deep, so Sally briefly surfaced and called Maple over.

"Sally, you all good? Sorry, I couldn't keep up."

"I'm good! I'm the one who left you in the dust."

She hung on to Syrup's side, filling Maple in on what she'd found.

"I see! Then I just have to stay right above you?"

"Yeah, please."

"You got it! I'll stand by with potions in case you do get hit. So you focus on exploring!"

Maple looked confident, and Sally grinned, certain they'd soon have results. She went back into the deep.

Sally dived straight down into the coral gap, holding a light in one hand to illuminate the interior. Only the entrance was tight; the rest

widened into a proper tunnel, and the light glistened off the fins of the tropical fish.

Certain there was no immediate threat, Sally moved cautiously forward.

No monsters appeared, and at the far end, she found a placard buried in seaweed and coral.

“.....”

She shined her light on that, parting the seaweed and cutting the coral away until she could read it.

She saved a copy of the image and surfaced.

“*Gasp!* Maple, got something.”

“Oh! Like what?”

Sally climbed aboard Syrup, and Maple scrambled over eagerly.

Sally showed Maple the photo she’d taken, and it had a rough map of the entire seventh stratum. Several places had marks on them.

“This. It’s a bit different from the drop maps Chrome was chasing, but I bet it’s part of another hidden quest.”

“Mm, mm! But there’s a *lot* of marks here. And it said there were three keys... Is this even for the same quest?”

“Well, here’s the spring. And it’s got a mark. I bet some of these are the right spots, and the rest are hints.”

It was a very rough map, so the marks just gave general areas. You’d have to search the entire desert *and* the jungle next to it.

“Wanna head back? See if anyone else knows things?”

“Good idea. There’s start points for this all over, so maybe someone in the guild’s bumped into one.”

Better to rope in the guild than ransack the entire map on their own.

As they opened the door, they found Kanade at the table across from the twins.

“Mm? Oh, welcome back. Wanna play?”

But Kanade was making a move in the board game as he spoke—which made the twins throw up their hands in defeat.

“Nah, today we’re just wondering if you know things.”

Maple filled them in on what they’d found, and Kanade started nodding, like he’d heard of this.

“I saw something like that in the library,” he said. “Once-flourishing towns that linger on in the hearts of monsters...and those towns matched these marks here.”

He pointed to three points on the map. One of which was the spring.

“Oh! That sounds promising, Sally!”

“I’m shocked you knew. The library’s gotta have a huge pile of books.”

“Yeah, so I read them all.”

““A-all?!””

The twins shrieked in unison as Kanade pulled out another board game.

“It was pretty fun, and several of them lead you to quests. Worth reading yourselves—but it’ll take a while.”

How had he managed to devour the entire library? He just had skills.

Faced with this sheer processing power, the twins slumped back in their seats.

“Mai, I don’t think we’re gonna beat him.”

“N-no...not that we ever did.”

“Welp, let us know how it goes. And play games when you get back.”

“Sure! We’ll just clear this thing and return in time for payday!”

“You’ve never beat him, either, Maple?”

“But it’s fun losing, too! Kanade can adjust his difficulty levels just like any video game.”

“What? Where’s the controller?”

Sally eyed Kanade suspiciously. He nodded, his smile never wavering. Sally decided this fit right in line with what she knew about him.

“You’ve been playing me at level one,” he said.

“Level one is too hard!”

“What’s it go up to? Ten?!”

“Ah-ha-ha! See if you can get there! Good luck winning!”

““We’ll try...!””

They started the next round, and Maple and Sally headed back out, certain they were on the right track.

“Well, we made it this far...”

“But we’ve gotta climb *that*?”

Maple and Sally had arrived at one of the locations Kanade had said were likely to contain a key.

Before them stood a tree so tall it pierced the clouds. The massive trunk was wound with vines, and the bark was peeling—so there were plenty of footholds, forming a route upward.

But even from here, they could see vicious avian monsters prowling, far more powerful than anything in the sea.

“...Think you could climb that?”

“Urgh...it looks hard.”

“Cool, then let’s do it your way.”

“Eh-heh-heh, that’s what I like to hear!”

Maple changed up her equipment, made two extra shields float beside her, and placed Heaven’s Throne on giant Syrup’s back. Once she was seated, she activated Martyr’s Devotion and deployed her weapons.

And by changing to her white gear, she stood ready to use her damage-negation skill.

“Come on board, Sally! Don’t fall off!”

“If I do, I can make footholds in the air.”

This combination of skills turned Syrup into a flying fortress, and they started climbing, utterly ignoring the intended path. Three monster birds swooped toward them, screeching.

“Commence Assault! Pierce Guard!”

“Oboro, Binding Barrier!”

As Maple launched her assault, Sally had her pet stop the birds in midair. Maple wasn’t that great at aiming, but even she could hit a stationary target.

“Thanks! Birds fly all over the place and can be very hard to hit.”

“You’re welcome. Cyclone Cutter!”

“Syrup, Spirit Cannon!”

Maple had her pet join her, and both of their beams scorched the birds.

The birds fought back valiantly, but Maple had wisely used a skill to block their armor-piercing skills, and nothing else they did could hurt her.

The infallible flying fortress was more than a match for a couple of vicious birds.

“And they’re down!”

“This should be a cakewalk. Let’s go straight to the top!”

Even as they spoke, more birds came swooping down, beaks open wide—but it was clear which side was the prey.

They each gained a level on the way and reached the top in style.

The leaves were on a scale proportionate to the trunk, sturdy enough to support both their weights. There was a huge bird’s nest at the heart of the tree.

“Incoming!”

“On it!”

Sally hopped off Syrup onto the leaf, brandishing her daggers. Maple turned her barrels toward the nest.

A feather as long as they were tall drifted down—followed by a monster bird. They’d fought one this size before.

“Just like the boss from the second event! Bet it has similar attack patterns!”

Maple and Sally had climbed a snowy mountain and fought a boss so fierce it had almost taken Maple down. The main difference here was that this bird wielded thorns and vines instead of ice; the elements adjusted to match its locale.

“Got it! Then let’s show it how much stronger we are!”

“And look at its neck!”

Sally was pointing at a necklace with a large green gem on it. Clearly the key they were after.

“Let’s win this thing!”

“Damn skippy!”

Both girls were all fired up. The boss let out an ear-piercing screech, and the battle began.

As long as Martyr’s Devotion was active, nothing could actually hurt them. That let Sally go all out. With the booming of Maple’s guns echoing in her ears, she threw out her new skills.

“Waterway! Oboro, Binding Barrier!”

The first was a move that had come from leveling her medal skill. From Sally’s feet sprang a diagonal column of water, defying gravity. Sally dived in and swam quickly up it, then popped out above, spinning through the air and delivering a series of slashes from the bird’s shoulder to its stomach.

Waterway not only propelled her forward, but the water itself provided additional defense—a very handy skill. It greatly lowered her chances of taking a hit while helping her approach the enemy, which fit well with Sally’s play style. And the more ways she had of getting off the ground, the better.

“Inspire! Syrup, Mother Nature! Thorn Shackles!”

Maple’s equipment was geared to defense, so she was primarily supporting Sally’s onslaught.

Vines rose up through the leaves, wrapping around the trunk and binding the bird. These were followed by thorns that did damage and paralyzed their targets.

Oboro had stunned it first—and now Syrup’s paralysis kept it immobilized, allowing them to keep the burst damage going.

“Quintuple Slash!”

Sally chomped a Doping Seed to max her STR and used Maple’s vines as footholds, unleashing a blinding combo right in the bird’s face. Maple’s artillery fire was pounding away, adding to the total damage.

At last, the paralysis wore off, and the bird began tearing free of the thorns and vines—but Maple wasn’t about to let it.

“Syrup, Spirit Cannon! Sleepy Petals!”

A sweet scent filled the air, and pink petals scattered on the breeze. The bird grew listless...and fell asleep.

Sally quit slashing and pulled out an Iz bomb.

“Damn, Syrup got strong. Those are some *good* binds.”

“If it can’t move, even I can catch up! It really helps!”

Maple got up off her throne, switched to her black gear, and closed in.

The throne sealed “evil” skills, which really limited Maple’s options. Her standing up meant it was time to go all out on the offensive.

“Full Deploy! Lure of the Deep! Predators!”

“Yoiks.”

Maple had angel wings on her back, gun barrels bristling from every inch of her, and monsters on each side—plus her left arm transformed into five tentacles spewing black mist.

Anyone would break into a run if they saw that coming toward them. Sally managed to suppress that instinct, but it sure didn’t feel like this thing was on *her* side.

Maple got as close as she could, then wrapped her tentacles around the bird’s face. The monsters on her flanks attacked—and then she busted out her big moves.

“Hydra! Saturating Chaos! Commence Assault!”

Each of these made damage sparks gush out of it—and then Sally’s bomb went off.

“Holy crap.”

The sheer quantity of hits produced so many sparks that Sally couldn’t help but gape. The tentacles grabbed the bird’s head once more, and it exploded without ever escaping the vines.

Maple pumped a fist, thrilled by her newfound power.

“Aww yeah! I can still win if all my hits land!”

“Ha-ha, that was something else. Better pick up the gem before we lose track of it.”

Maple nodded and splashed off into the poison, to the crater where the necklace lay. It was like a Hula-Hoop size to the girls, so it was not hard to locate.

It crumbled when she picked it up, leaving only the green gem behind.

Green Key

One of three keys for a very special door.

“It’s the second one, Sally!”

“Nice. What next? Kanade gave us another locale. Do we hit that up next?”

“I’m out of Devour, but...how you doing?”

“I’m good to go. You know, I’m technically supposed to be the DPS here. If we’re fighting, I can go all day.”

“You and Oboro!”

The fox was on Sally’s shoulder, and Maple reached out to rub its head.

“Syrup’s pretty strong now, but Oboro’s gained a lot of levels and new skills. Why don’t I show those off in the next fight?”

“Can’t wait!”

With the avian key guardian down, they headed to the next destination.

The next area featured powerful winds gusting between mysterious floating rocks.

They rode Sally’s horse as close as they could, then continued on foot.

The rocks were more like chunks of land torn out of the ground, and there were blind spots everywhere. Whatever force kept them suspended seemed to extend to players, leaving gravity weak and their steps floaty. They couldn’t exactly fight on horseback, and they’d decided it was better to get off early and acclimatize to the low-gravity conditions.

“Dodging is a bit harder. Maple, we don’t have to head in until you’re used to it.”

“Okay! This place is great. Such a weird feeling!”

Maple hopped around awhile, coming back down like a feather

fluttering in the wind.

“There’s no Stellar Force like the last event, so best to minimize hang time.”

Sally figured out a few tricks for that and could soon walk around without issue.

“The winds are fierce. Feels like they’re about to sweep us off the ground.”

“They’re carrying something toward us now!”

“Eh? Urk!”

A massive boulder was flying right at them from the fore.

Sally had fully adapted and was able to sidestep it, but nobody expected Maple to be nimble.

There was a thud as the rock hit, and she went flying, bouncing several times, slamming into another rock behind them and sliding down it.

“Maple! Th-that looked bad...”

“I—I can’t believe it! Since when do rocks fly?”

Maple got back up like nothing had happened—like she always did. Sally looked relieved and held out a hand.

“If they’re riding the wind, then we just have to keep an eye on the direction the wind’s blowing from.”

“Oh! Makes sense. But at least it’s not piercing or fixed damage! That means Martyr’s Devotion is safe to use.”

“Thanks. I’ll dodge where I can, but insurance is always nice. This zone makes moving hard.”

“The wind’s blowing from the right, so this way!”

“Yeah, and this time it’s a bunch of pebbles!”

Sally hefted her twin daggers, heightening her focus—she’d dodged flying pebbles before. She deflected one with her blade, turning her body to avoid the next, then jumping back out of the path of a third.

Each time the blue aura around her grew brighter, and her STR increased.

“Whew...”

“That’s our Sally!”

“I’d like to get the buff maxed before we reach the boss. Just takes a little concentration.”

She’d figured out how to keep herself safe here and neatly slipped past every rock and pebble that flew by. The total opposite of Maple, who just let them all bounce off her.

“Oh, monsters.”

A wolf and a hawk arrived, swept in by a white, glittering wind. Their eyes alone glowed red—clearly no ordinary enemies.

“Oboro, Shadow Clone! Phantom!”

On her command, Sally split into five, and then that number doubled.

One half went after the wolf, and the other half, the hawk. The monsters shook themselves, generating blades of wind that tore the clones apart.

“All I need’s a second’s distraction! Pinpoint Attack!”

Sally flanked a wolf, stabbing it in the neck with one dagger. Its body instantly unraveled like so much string.

“So weak... Leap!”

Sally jumped high, stabbing a hawk while it fended off her clone.

This monster, too, shattered instantly.

“So this is about quantity!”

If each individual was weak, then it was only natural they’d come in overwhelming numbers.

Even as Sally spoke, more winds whirled, coating the ground in wolves and the sky in wheeling hawks.

“Maple! Crowds are all you!”

“Got it! Full Deploy! Commence Assault!”

Her guns made short work of incoming wind blades or pebble volleys. Maple started spinning, blanketing a 360-degree range in artillery fire.

But since there *were* a lot of them, a few wind blades did slip through.

“Ow? Oh, piercing! Um, Pierce Guard!”

“I’ll thin the numbers, too. Oboro, Spreading Flames!”

Oboro threw fire at a nearby wolf—and it crackled, bursting and igniting monsters on either side. The flames weren’t that strong, but they easily handled wolves made of wind.

“Thanks! Now, let’s see...”

Maple switched to her green dress and activated Poltergeist, turning her lasers into beam swords and waving them wildly. This easily dispatched enemies too high for Sally to reach.

There were a lot, but with piercing damage taken care of and Maple here, they posed no real threat.

“Whew...that had me worried, but they weren’t that bad.”

“Mm, good for racking up dodges.”

“Oh, right! Oboro can generate even more clones now? Ten is a lot!”

“Yeah, but the five Phantom makes are more like Mirage. They’re just bait—can’t do any real damage.”

“But the Shadow Clones can, right?”

“Right. Let’s keep moving! Don’t wanna get surrounded again.”

“Agreed!”

They picked up the pace and headed farther in.

Bounding from rock to rock, they carved their way through more packs of wolves.

Every now and then, Maple got knocked away, and Sally reeled her back in. At last, they reached the back.

Multiple boulders hovered over the flat ground while the winds swirled like a vortex. A giant made entirely of wind loomed at the center of it.

“Welp, I bet that takes more than one hit. Best we get ready.”

“Mm! On it!”

As Maple aimed her guns, the giant sprang into action. The winds swirling around him sped up, sweeping boulders up in their current.

“Uh...I can’t dodge those!”

With a noise like clashing metal, Maple was sent flying. And since there was more than one boulder, Maple was bounced from one to the other like a pinball.

“Ah! Aughhhhh!”

“Maple! I...don’t see a way to help you. Uh...better focus!”

Sally was ducking low, stopping on a dime, suddenly darting forward, and weaving her way through the swirling boulders.

Maple was moving too fast and too far for Martyr’s Devotion to be at all reliable.

“Well, I said I’d be the one doing damage. Oboro, Blighted Blaze! Whet Wisp!”

At her command, Oboro’s skill coated her in blue flames, buffing her damage. Then fire appeared on her dagger blades, extending the range.

She put her body in a spin, slicing through the giant’s gales, letting her arms fully extend into a deep slash.

Red sparks flew, and the flames Oboro placed on her burst.

“How’s your MP doing, Oboro?”

Lasers fired from the giant’s back, and Sally leaped back—but they hurt the giant, not her. The damage sparks made that clear.

“Maple? Yikes, she’s going nuts.”

Maple was still being pinballed around, but this did no damage to her. So she’d decided to harness this blazing speed, using Poltergeist to turn her lasers toward the center and let them flail where they would. Occasionally she’d fire her weapons and propel herself into rocks and things, so the boss’s wind attacks weren’t really hitting her.

“Really using that field gimmick... All right, time I do my bit.”

With Maple’s attacks drawing agro, this was a chance for her to use skills that otherwise left her exposed.

She moved right up against one of the giant’s legs and activated her major damage dealers.

“Quintuple Slash! Power Attack!”

There was extra damage from Blighted Blaze and from Chaser Blade, and all of that was buffed by Sword Dance and the items she'd swallowed. It was hard to believe daggers could do that kind of damage.

As red sparks flew, the giant's leg vanished. As expected, it toppled over.

"Perfect!"

Sally dodged through the flying pebbles to the head and slashed away.

But a huge boulder came hurtling in, determined to stop her.

"Oboro! Spirited Away!"

At her cry—Sally disappeared. Not a momentary transparency like Fleeting Shadow—she legitimately ceased to exist for a full second. And since she didn't exist, nothing could hit her. Using this just before the boulder hit meant it sailed harmlessly right on by.

"Nice—it worked! Oboro, Binding Barrier!"

Success just meant she could attack even faster. Maple's pinball laser flailing had racked up substantial damage, too, and the boss could not survive this final flurry. One last gust of wind blew—and the floating rocks slowed to a stop. Maple hit the ground hard and rolled over to Sally.

She was completely fine, of course, just...a little dizzy.

"Good job! Oboro's fires do all kinds of stuff now! Gosh...you're like Mii!"

"Oboro is all fires and illusions, and I'm mostly water and ice. How'd you like that Blighted Blaze buff? Cool, right?"

"Yeah! So ninja! And you let a rock pass through you!"

"Oboro makes it so if I really am outta luck, I get a little grace period. But this's what we're here for!"

Sally scooped a red gem off the ground—one of the giant's eyes.

"Now we just gotta go to those ruins Kanade mentioned."

"I hope this is enough. These boss fights are pretty rough!"

But they were unaware of any other requirements, so they made a beeline for the ruins. If they needed anything else, they'd find out when they got there.

"Let's make this snappy! Can't wait to find out what's there!"

"Okay, then—back to the horse!"

"Woo!"

With all three keys, they galloped away.

The ruins were all bits of houses and pavement, swallowed up by nature. Closer to a forest than a ruin or an abandoned village.

"Guess we just start looking."

"Got it! I hope we find it quick!"

They split up, roaming the man-made areas. It really didn't take them long.

"Sally, over here!"

Maple was pointing at the one surviving pedestal in a heap of fragments.

It had three depressions in it, their meaning obvious enough.

"Mind if I do the honors?"

"Yeah, go ahead."

Maple placed the three gems in the depressions, their glow bathed the pedestal—and both Syrup and Oboro emerged from their rings unbidden.

"Syrup?"

"Oboro?"

Baffled, they looked down at their feet...and the red, green, and white lights grew bright. This was clearly a teleport. Once the light died down, they opened their eyes...and found themselves in a town filled with animals. But no humans at all—just every type of animal and monster, living together in harmony.

As they gaped at this, their pets started moving.

"Wh-what's going on?"

"I guess we should follow?"

They'd made it here, but this wasn't an actual quest or anything, so there were no instructions. If their pets were acting on their own, it seemed best to take the hint.

They followed for a while, steadily moving away from the town itself. Syrup and Oboro stopped by a stone fountain filled with glittering water.

"This looks important."

"I guess? Sure doesn't seem like normal water."

Their pets turned to look at them. Like they wanted to get in the water.

Neither girl was inclined to refuse, so they picked their pets up and placed them gently in the water.

"Can you handle it? You're good?"

"Letting go now. It's pretty shallow."

When they let go, their pets started frolicking in the glowing water. The light wrapped itself around them—until they could no longer be seen.

"Augh! Was this bad?!"

Maple hastily snatched Syrup up, and Sally pulled Oboro out of the water, too. The light lingered, and they couldn't decide what to do next—until it suddenly burst, and their pets were back to normal.

"Whew...uh, Syrup?"

"Oboro?"

The pattern on Syrup's shell had changed, and flowers and grass grew from the ground directly underneath. Oboro's collar was a bit more ornate, and there was an extra tail waving behind it.

““Huh?””

They still seemed to adore their owners and were happily rubbing up against them. Hugging their pets close, the girls looked at each other.

It took a minute for their minds to start moving again. They looked over their pets carefully.

“Syrup's definitely looking fancier. And...bigger?”

“Wow...an extra tail... How many can you get?”

They agreed their pets were undoubtedly cuter now. As they hugged them, they got a system message.

They read it over—and the same line made them both turn to each other.

“Evolved? Oh. They can acquire new skills now.”

“Wow! Evolution! Evolution...I guess they did fight a lot.”

“We've had them with us since the middle of the second event.”

“How you've grown! Eh-heh-heh, this is so nice.”

“But I bet there's a long way to go.”

“Yeah?”

“Mm, the message says this happens if they have enough experience, but it didn't say it only happens once.”

And if her fox's tails increased each time, that might show the real limit.

“It could wind up with nine tails. I dunno if it'll get one each time, but...Oboro, are you going for it?”

“Something to dream about anyway! We'd better tell the others. If we help, we can find the gems quick!”

“Good idea. Let's do that. No time like the present!”

They headed back to the guild home, pets held proudly in their arms.

Eager to show off their evolved pets, they burst in the front door. Kanade was still playing board games, but now Kasumi, Chrome, and Iz were all gathered around the twins.

“Oh? You two look extra happy.”

“Mm? You're back! Heh-heh, this looks like good news.”

They held Syrup and Oboro up, showing them off.

Everyone had spent enough time with their pets that they swiftly spotted the differences.

“Uh, what happened here?”

“Heh-heh-heh! They evolved! They're stronger *and* cuter!”

Maple eagerly shared the details.

“Oh...evolutions, huh. Still...”

“Yeah, I’ve been to the floating rock zone, but there was no giant.”

Maple had assumed everyone could get evolutions, but...maybe not. Iz said she hadn’t heard of anyone fighting up that giant tree.

“Um, maybe their levels and how affectionate they are matter? Maple and Sally have had their pets a long time.”

“Could be a factor. The book I read was about ways to draw out their powers. Let’s assume this happens once they’ve got their baseline skills.”

It did make sense you couldn’t evolve them as soon as you got them.

“So it is because we spent so much time together! Eh-heh-heh.”

Maple was rubbing Syrup’s head again. Her partner would be flying her around the field and fighting by her side forever. And evolutions just made that even more fun.

“Well, Maple and Sally have stronger monsters now, so the next event should be good.”

“Yeah. Our fighting styles have changed a lot, and this is a good chance to try them out.”

“Oh, right! The event! I’ll have to get Syrup leveled up!”

Evolution wasn’t the end. She had to take advantage of this new strength. And that would require some diligent grinding.

“We already did a bunch today...but you up for more, Maple?”

“J-just a little longer. If they level up, they might learn something new!”

They headed back out to the field, Maple’s curiosity and enthusiasm leading her from one pleasure to another.



By this point, the members of the dev team were thoroughly exhausted. Making all these monsters and events for the seventh stratum had wiped them out. Not only had they wanted different types of monster in each area, but they’d also needed to add their evolutions.

“How many rare monsters have been tamed?”

“Less than twenty percent. The map itself is huge, and there are plenty of strong monsters that aren’t rare.”

The rare monsters tended to be highly specialized, good for niche builds, and plenty of players had found them and just moved on.

“Looks like monsters that buff you regularly are very popular. And lots of people are taming mage- or tank-class pets.”

“What about the main guilds?”

“A full lineup of rare monsters, like they planned it together.”

“Yikes. Well, they’re only hard to *find*. Or...no, they’re picking them for compatibility.”

They looked over the monsters tamed by the Order of the Holy Sword, Flame Empire, and of course—Maple Tree.

“Yup, they’re good. Everyone got a rare that plays to their build.”

“And Maple and Sally both picked up an evolution. Without the benefit of any info getting out...”

Those two were really taking advantage of their lead in tame time. But still faster than the devs had expected.

“Have they got an internal compass pointing them to secrets?”

“Maybe. It sure feels like it...”

Once the initial rush of the new map settled down, it was time for the new event.

“How’s that gonna go?”

“The players are all turning into monsters, so we’ve gotta hit them in kind,” someone muttered, poring over the final enemy checks.

The game’s highest difficulties required monsters worthy of it.

“Oh, and Maple finally got tentacles.”

“...You make it sound inevitable.”

They hadn’t expected her to get that at all, but placing it on Night’s Facsimile’s skill slot had really caught them by surprise. That had made the skill far more powerful than it was ever intended to be.

“It was supposed to be a skill that would slow Maple down... Instead, it just gave her insane burst damage.”

“The tentacle spawn rate was super low, so how in the world did it manage to snag Maple?”

“No clue.”

That dungeon wasn’t somewhere you could casually enter whenever you liked. Maple getting there at all was a blind stroke of luck.

“Augh! I forgot! You can’t just thoughtlessly give monsters stomachs! Maple will voluntarily jump inside!”

“Watching them explode from the inside is so sad...”

“Should we make stomach-acid fixed damage? Or add a stun?”

“Even as is, only Maple can survive them or treat the stomach as safe harbor.”

“...True.”

“Let’s go over the event monsters one more time.”

“Probably a good idea.”

And they also had to double-check the pet behaviors, looking for any unexpected interactions.

As the event approached, Maple Tree's members collectively agreed to show off their new pets during the event itself. To that end, they all headed out to get them leveled. Maple herself was out helping Syrup do the same.

"Hmm, I thought running out of Devour would be a detriment, but these are pretty useful in their own right."

Maple swung her tentacle arm around. Anything it hit wound up paralyzed, so just randomly waving it proved very useful. Syrup's attacks weren't that strong, so once a few monsters were immobilized, Maple would weaken them with Hydra and stack them up in front of Syrup like a mother bird feeding her babies levels.

"Syrup! Spirit Cannon!"

Maple's monster heap soon had no HP, and Syrup a bunch of XP.

"Chasing them around is too hard... Maybe I should get caught by those tentacles again! In that cave everything came after *me*."

But while she debated the prospect of plunging into the octopus's lair again, Syrup went up a level and learned a new skill.

"Wow! Evolving gave you so many new skills to learn! Lessee..."

Maple checked the description.

It was very much in line with Syrup's nature-based powers.

"Red Garden? Sounds good already!"

Red Garden

When taking damage, everything within range receives additional damage worth 5% of the original damage value.

"Mm, sounds easy enough! Nice one, Syrup!"

Maple patted the turtle's head, lavishing praise. Normally, a skill that did extra damage to both friend and foe would be a two-edged sword, but in Maple's case, any downsides that involved taking damage just never factored in.

With Martyr's Devotion protecting all her party, Red Garden was turned into a pure buff to the damage they dealt. Since Maple Tree frequently fought in a circle around Maple herself, AOE buffs were easily applied.

Maple used Cover Move willy-nilly despite it doubling the damage she took for similar reasons—her defense was just so high she *still*

never took damage.

“Syrup, Red Garden!”

At Maple’s command, the ground was coated in roses. Thorny tendrils stretched in all directions, in quantities clearly symbolizing the skill’s additional damage.

And the flowers moved in tandem with Syrup itself. Like Martyr’s Devotion, the skill was centered on the user.

“Evolved Syrup can make flowers bloom all the time! I wonder if you’ll learn to make other kinds of gardens?”

Used appropriately, this could really help a party out. And Martyr’s Devotion made it so they could ignore this skill’s downside.

Syrup wasn’t big on attacking, but it learned a lot of binds, status effects, and defensive skills—her pet was growing up to be just like Maple. The main difference was that Syrup never looked terrifying.

“Well, let’s keep on going! Next goal!”

Maple found some more monsters and used her tentacles and Paralyze Shout to pile them up in front of Syrup. Rinse and repeat.

But doing something like that—even in the middle of a forest—attracted attention.

“We follow the ruckus...and find Maple.”

“Yikes, she really does have tentacles... Why?”

“If Mii hadn’t warned us, I might have attacked on sight. Even a fallen angel wouldn’t look this horrifying.”

The trio emerging from the underbrush were Misery, Marx, and Shin.

When she spotted them, Maple waved—with her tentacle arm.

“Oh! The Flame Empire crew... No Mii today?”

“She had other fish to fry. So we’re out getting our pets some levels.”

“Nice...”

Maple nodded. At her feet was Syrup’s rose garden. She had terrorized Marx enough in the past, so he was the first to spot Syrup’s upgrades.

“Does...Syrup look different?”

“Hngg, is it that obvious? But the details are secret! I think.”

She was trying to follow Sally’s advice and not share too much information, but with the rose garden and tentacles on full display, it was a bit late.

“Fair enough. You’re leveling for the next event? I sure don’t wanna run into you in the prelims, so you’ll just have to show us your new moves when we’re playing together some other time.”

“Mii said those tentacles were bad news.”

“Given the visual impact, they’d better be.”

Marx was hiding behind Misery and Shin, watching them wriggle.

“Well, it’s safe to make introductions,” Shin suggested—meaning their pets. “She is friends with Mii.”

“Why not?”

“If you’re both game, then...Release!”

At Marx’s command, space itself warped, and their tamed monsters were now visible again. On Marx’s head was a chameleon, its coloring constantly shifting. Shin had a hawk on his shoulder, and Misery, a long-haired white cat at her feet.

“Huh? What? Wow, where’d they come from?!”

They had clearly not emerged from rings, and Maple was amazed and curious. Shin chuckled. It was the obvious response.

“We’re just letting you see ’em today, ha-ha-ha. Well worth it to see you jump like that.”

“Heh-heh-heh...we’re looking forward to seeing Maple Tree’s pets.”

“Later...I hope we don’t run into each other in the event.”

“Let’s both try and have fun!”

They had plans of their own and soon waved and moved on.

Maple was impressed once again by the sheer variety of pets out there...and then went back to feeding Syrup.



Not long after, details of the event’s main round were revealed.

Three days of sped-up time. Like the tower, split difficulty levels, with the prelim results deciding the difficulty and rewards available to each player.

The main round was survival exploration on a field filled with powerful monsters.

All eight Maple Tree members gathered in the guild home to go over the details. It seemed that silver medals were possible to find while exploring, so everyone got excited. And on the highest difficulty, surviving a full day would net you a silver medal, two days would get you three, and if you made it to the very end—five.

“I’d love for us all to hit the highest difficulty,” Maple said.

“Yeah. Especially since I’ve got Sou now.”

“I’d call it a good goal.”

Everyone was on board with it, but whether that would be possible—came down to the prelim. Since each would be fending for themselves, they’d all just give it their best shot and see where it got them.

“This’ll be our first time all fighting together with our monsters!”

“Hmm. Ideally, we’d level them as much as possible, then try fighting together once before the main event. But...well, I think it’ll

work out either way.”

“We’ll do what we can to make sure we can hit the top difficulty!”

“But doing it alone is really nerve-racking.”

Mai and Yui nearly always did things together, but the prelim rules said pets were the only help players had. They both looked nervous, and the others offered encouragement.

“You’re both much stronger now. You’ll be fine!”

“Yeah. And you’ve got Tsukimi and Yukimi with you!”

Their tamed monsters helped a lot. Maybe enough that the highest difficulty would be an achievable goal. The twins clenched their fists, hoping to prove themselves.

“Doesn’t sound like you’ll have to fight any players in the main round, so we can relax and have fun. Maple’s Martyr’s Devotion makes monster fights easy enough.”

Most monsters weren’t smart enough to switch to piercing attacks. But players would *only* use those the moment they saw Maple.

“The key there will be how far we can get. They’ve revealed the map already...and it’s pretty huge.”

“Yeah...which might make things tough for us in the main round, too.”

“Tsukimi and Yukimi do make it a little better.”

Like Syrup, the bears could be Giganticized. They only got big enough for a single small player to ride, but this was a big asset for anyone as slow as the twins.

“Then I guess we’ll all just keep leveling and wait for the prelims!” Maple said.

Everyone nodded and started making the most of the time remaining. This event would be the first big test of their new monster pals, and nobody could hide their excitement.

As they all busied themselves with leveling their pets, the day of the eighth event prelims arrived.

Since this was a solo fight—no parties allowed—pet monster abilities were especially critical.

They were competing on number of monsters felled and the time it took to die.

But time was limited, so they had to raise their rank by killing monsters—and interfere with the competition by taking out other players.

It was important to balance the two.

If they made it to the top rankings, their main round battle would take place on a map offering better rewards.

“Okay, let’s hit the main round together!”

“You bet. Do your worst, Maple! It’s important to kill a lot of

monsters this time.”

“I can use all my skills this time—so I will!”

There was enough time between the prelim and main round that her limited skills would refresh.

“Get out there and fight!”

At Maple’s cry, everyone cheered—and then they were wreathed in light and transported to the initial field.

When the light faded away, Maple saw the prelim map stretching out before her.

Like the first event, she’d spawned in an abandoned village. She looked around but didn’t immediately spot any other players.

“All right! Then let’s find some monsters!”

Kill quantity was critical here. Survival also mattered, but that alone wouldn’t let her rank.

“Just a minute, Syrup. Predators!”

She’d be fighting on her own this time, so she didn’t need Martyr’s Devotion. That was a big plus.

“Other players would know right where I am.”

Since that skill bathed the ground in light, it was like a sign announcing her approach. And only other Maple Tree members would dare get close to her. Nobody welcomes certain death with open arms.

With her monsters flanking her, she checked out the abandoned town.

“Anything here...yikes!”

Just as she rounded a taller building, she bumped into a monster.

A reptilian head and torso loomed over her—and it had a long tail. Less *dragon* and more *carnivorous dinosaur*. The dino saw Maple and howled.

“Paralyze Shout!”

Maple made the first move, using a skill to lock her foe down. Her Predators bit into it.

“This seems strong... Let’s use Devour!”

The paralysis had knocked the dino over, so Maple pushed her shield against its head. Her monsters had gnawed away enough health that it burst into light.

“Nice! I was worried for a second, but that was no threat if it can’t move. Okay! Next!”

Having made short work of her first foe, Maple went looking for more. It seemed like there were all kinds, large and small, and they just kept coming.

But a lot of them spotted her and instantly ran away.

“Ugh, I’m not getting many. Is it because I’m so slow? Wait...”

She’d looked at her stat bar and saw several symbols she didn’t

recognize. A debuff that drove monsters away, a buff that upped her attack—Maple didn't remember getting any of these.

"Huh? When the...? Uh, um—oh! Because I beat some monsters?"

She checked the detailed descriptions, and it said they both came from defeating certain types of monsters. Maple had been running around taking out anything she saw, which left her with a whole list of them.

"I can't have monsters running away! How can I beat them then?!"

She wanted to keep Devour on hand for now, but the monsters the debuff didn't drive off were pretty strong. She just kept fighting them. Each was pretty tough but not really designed to counter her, so most didn't have piercing damage. That meant they were just fuel for her kill count.

But since she didn't know how anyone else was doing, she was worried she wasn't killing enough.

Her Predators were decimating the vicinity of the ruins, so she dropped a Hydra lake and moved on. She went through the woods beyond onto an open prairie.

"Ugh, I need more kills! Mm? Is that...?"

Her eyes caught a field of red flowers, their stems taller than her. They looked a lot like something she'd encountered in the jungle event.

"This area is open enough... Okay, that'll work!"

She moved over to one of the big flowers and deployed her weapons—which turned her arm into a giant sword. She then cut the stem in half, reaching both arms up to catch the red flower. But this flower—was a monster. At the spot where she'd cut it, rootlike tendrils reached out, winding around her.

"Good! It worked! Now..."

With it still clinging to her, she moved back to the field and sat down at the center of it.

"Okay," she said, glaring at the flower. "Do your worst! Hyah!"

She poked the flower petal with her sword.

It gave off a sweet scent that spread across the plains—and the forest began to quiver. The movement headed her way.

This was her plan. These red flowers summoned *tons* of monsters. That would normally be incredibly dangerous, but to Maple, they were just a handy-dandy monster lure.

"Sweet! Now I'm getting somewhere! Let's take 'em all out before someone else does!"

Goblins lunged at her and birds cast spells from above, but she killed them all.

Being efficient, she let the Predators handle anything that got

close and focused on taking out the distant foes with her guns.

“Can’t have my Predators dying... Martyr’s Devotion! Syrup, Awaken!”

At last she could put her pet in play. There were tons of monsters latching on to her or rushing in for a hit and darting away, but she didn’t care.

“Syrup! Mother Nature! Red Garden! White Garden! Sinking Ground!”

Maple picked up Syrup, running through its skills.

On the glowing circle around her, fields of red and white flowers bloomed.

This was very pretty, and if it weren’t for all the monsters rushing at her, she’d have loved to stop and look. But what the flowers *did* was not so pretty. The red flowers provided an area damage boost, and the white flowers lowered their stats.

On top of that, Sinking Ground altered the very soil—when the monsters stepped in, they sank into it like a quagmire, swallowed up by the ground. Anyone else was snared by Mother Nature’s vines and fed to the Predators.

Beautiful flower gardens centered on Maple and Syrup, turning the land into a death trap where one step inside meant doom.

The vines had monsters trapped in the air above like shrike’s prey, and Maple turned her guns toward them. As she fired, she tapped the flower clinging to her.

“Another round, please!”

More of the sweet scent wafted out, luring more monsters to her garden of death.

“What happened to the bad effects...? Ugh, that could be bad news...”

She checked what the incoming mob had given her and found one that put her location on everybody’s maps.

Worried that other players would steal her kills or attack her, Maple picked up the pace.

But despite her fears, she never saw another player.

For the simple reason that if the map displayed a death trap, nobody would voluntarily go there.

A few swung through the vicinity to witness the horrors firsthand and saw monsters sinking into the ground and impaled on vines, with poison peat all around. They quickly concluded that it was best left untouched.

“Nobody’s coming? Then let’s go again!”

Maple flicked the flower again, and another monster rampage began.

“Whew...I’m doing...okay? Thanks, Tsukimi.”

Mai was on her bear’s back—it was currently three yards long. She was riding it across a wasteland.

She usually fought back-to-back with Yui, the two of them covering each other, so she really didn’t have much experience on her own. With that in mind, she’d gone for a wide-open area where she was less likely to get ambushed.

“.....! Other players!”

She’d spotted three in the distance. You couldn’t form parties here, but if you lucked into meeting other members of your own guilds, you could still help each other last longer.

The distant players must have spotted Mai because they raised their weapons and approached.

The twins might be in Maple Tree, but everyone knew if you dodged their attacks and played it right, you might win. They weren’t inclined to run.

When they were close enough, Mai hopped off her bear.

“Tsukimi, let’s go! Power Share! Charge!”

Red light surrounded them both, then Tsukimi charged at the other players.

“Tsukimi! Bright Star!”

At her cry, the tips of Tsukimi’s fur lit up. A green glow spread out in all directions.

This was a pretty sight—but also did a *lot* of damage, one-shotting the nearest player.

“Aughhhh!”

“Y-you’re kidding?”

“Farshot! Tsukimi, Shred!”

They’d been all focused on Mai, so when the bear demonstrated insane destruction, they froze up—and more attacks hit. Unable to withstand it, the other two exploded into light.

“Whew...g-good. Thank you, Tsukimi. You’re so strong!”

Mai rubbed her bear’s head, and it made happy noises, kneeling down. She climbed back up, and they moved on.

Despite what she’d said, she’d only just tamed Tsukimi—its attack wasn’t all that powerful. STR was certainly its highest stat, but it couldn’t one-shot anyone.

“Good thing you learned Power Share.”

This skill allowed Mai and Tsukimi to share their STR stat. This had been intended to allow the bears to share their high STR stat, buffing the player—but with Mai and Yui, it worked the other way around. Their ridiculously high STR went right to the bears. That

meant low-power area attack skills were now instantly fatal.

“I hope Yui’s still alive... Oh, a message from her!”

Mai, I’m still hanging on, but it’s much harder without you. Have you looked at your map? Maple’s location is on it. Can we meet up there?

Mai checked her map and quickly found Maple. She wasn’t sure why the map showed that, but it was a good goal to head toward.

“Mm, that should work.”

Whew! Then let’s meet at Maple! Don’t die!

She sent a message back and had Tsukimi start running.

“Onward, Tsukimi! Star Step!”

The bear’s footsteps began to glow, and light wreathed around them. This was a simple skill that made Tsukimi move faster, but compared to Mai’s usual walking speed, it was very fast indeed. A few monsters came at them on the way, and she dispatched those without ever dismounting.

“Tsukimi! Dazzle! Destroy Mode! Double Strike!”

Her bear’s skill provided a momentary stun—but with Mai around, that moment proved fatal. There was a dull thud, and the golems and orcs all went flying.

Since her battles took mere seconds, Mai’s kill count was pretty high.

When she had to go through a forest, she clung to Tsukimi and had it climb a tree, jumping from branch to branch.

This bear was far sprightlier than its bulk implied and made Mai pretty mobile.

“Eh-heh, I’m so glad I have you, Tsukimi.”

She stopped on a branch near their destination, waiting for word from Yui. It wasn’t long before she spotted a white bear with a pink aura racing across the treetops.

“Yui!”

“Mai! Whew. How was it? Kill lots of monsters?”

“Thanks to Tsukimi, yes. You?”

“Yukimi was going all out! We beat a bunch of players, too!”

Since they had the same pets and had raised them together, Yui could do anything Mai could do.

“Be careful how you use skills. We can’t party up right now.”

“Yeah. Let’s check out Maple. She hasn’t moved yet.”

“The map icon isn’t going away...which might mean she’s in trouble.”

They bounded across the branches, taking a look at the next zone over. Their maps showed a prairie—but their eyes saw naught but *hell*.

No sign of anything grassy. A vast purple toxic bog, from which bloomed brightly colored flowers. An uncanny sight.

The monsters rushing into it were clearly a different class than what they'd been fighting—all of them looked extremely powerful. There were even full-size dragons.

And they were all impaled on plants or sharp rocks, then bound tight by vines that did damage over time.

Poison, sleep, paralysis—all accompanied by DOT effects. One step into this hellscape meant death.

The sheer quantity of light particles was astounding.

"I-is Maple in there?"

"I think so. We can't get anywhere close. Let's go somewhere else, Mai."

"Yeah, we'd better do that. We'll have to ask what she did later."

The longer they watched, the worse this was getting, so they averted their eyes and ran off across the trees, looking for a better hunting ground.



"Hmm. What do I do? We promised Maple we'd all try to rank..."

Iz was still working on a plan. She had powerful bombs with her, so she could dish out damage—but doing so required a lot of prep, so it would be hard for her to kill enough monsters to rank.

"Let's get that prep started, at least. Here looks good. Better send the others a message..."

Iz's approach was the opposite of the twins—she'd ventured into a jungle denser than any forest and was hunting there. There were a *lot* of monsters here—and a lot of players there to hunt them. Iz made her preparations while avoiding detection from either. The message she'd sent advised her fellow guild members to keep their distance, since she wasn't about to hold back.

Iz removed some bombs from her inventory and called out her pet. Fey was attuned to the forest, and its wings looked like leaves.

"Fey: Forest Fury, Item Boost, Pixie Prank, Recycle."

At her command, the spirit fluttered over to the bombs, bathing them in a green aura. A moment later, the bombs absorbed that light, changing shape and becoming more dangerous in the process. The next skill boosted the bombs' power still further. Iz nodded, pleased with herself. Pixie Prank made it so only she (and members of her guild) could see the bombs—now she just had to prime them for detonation.

“Didn’t expect all these thorns... Let’s put one here.”

The bombs were now covered in spikes, like giant burrs. She went round putting them in thick brush or tree hollows—places where they wouldn’t be set off prematurely. Sneakily moving around the jungle.

“Next step...”

She pulled a blue crystal from her pouch. Water poured out of it—which changed Fey to a water spirit.

“Let’s keep this up. Fey, Water Web.”

Fey went flying off around the jungle, laying down threads so thin they were very easy to overlook. The jungle was slowly filling up with Iz’s skill-imbued items.

Each time Iz cracked a crystal, Fey changed elements, granting different enhancements to her items.

Ice, lightning, earth, and fire. Since all were transparent, the jungle itself appeared unchanged.

“Whew... Okay, that should do it. Nice work, Fey.”

Iz used a rope to evacuate to the top of a tree, then tied herself firmly to it. She checked the water web Fey had strung up next to her.

“Great, I made sure no guild members are in the area, so here goes nothing. Fey! Fairy Guardian!”

This skill dramatically reduced the amount of damage taken from items. Just in case. Once the effect took hold, Iz broke a yellow crystal by the water web.

This generated an electric bolt that traveled along the web, coursing through the entire jungle.

Iz closed her eyes and put her fingers in her ears—and the entire jungle lit up, explosions roaring.

“.....!”

The bolt had triggered the bombs, and their blast radii were filled with ice blades, toxic goop, fire, lightning, wind, and light—every effect Fey had bestowed. Status effects and blast damage galore.

And Iz’s bombs were not single use. Recycle gave them a 50 percent chance of reappearing unused after each detonation.

Since these blasts came from empty-looking ground, there was nowhere left to run. Once the booms finally stopped, Iz looked down and saw no trace of the jungle left, only the remnants of all manner of elemental effect.

“...W-was that overkill? But...I’ve gotta make sure I rank!”

She still had plenty of time, so she raced off to the next scheduled blast site.



“Wow...is she serious...?”

Chrome saw the jungle go up in the distance, and his jaw dropped. And that was *knowing* exactly what had caused the destruction.

“Fey’s powers are something else. Don’t wanna cross that kill zone.”

He could only imagine how many players and monsters had died in that.

Iz sent out a new message.

“That’s where she’s headed next? Then I’m sure as hell not. With those bombs going off multiple times, there’s no way I’d survive.”

Chrome was mostly wearing his armor-type pet monster, Necro. The real strength of this arrangement was that a portion of Necro’s stats was added to Chrome’s.

It wasn’t all that flashy, but it made Chrome even more durable.

He’d fought a fair number of players and monsters, but one-on-one, few things could out DPS his recovery. He was steadily racking up wins.

Then a tree monster—a treant—appeared before him. He’d fought several before, but this one was far larger.

“Oh, a big one! And this is the type that grants a buff that tells you where monsters are.”

Unlike the twins, his new partner didn’t really improve his movement speed. Knowing where to go was a big help.

“Okay, let’s go, Necro! Polter Bolster!”

At Chrome’s cry, Necro changed shape. The armor grew thicker and stronger, his great shield even bigger—a huge defense buff, but with a price—he moved slower, and his attacks were weaker.

One of Necro’s key features was that it could change shapes like this and could use different skills in each one, its functions fitting the form.

“Gonna take my time till I get an opening.”

Chrome soaked the hit with his shield and struck back. The treant’s attacks were simple and could not break through Chrome’s enhanced defense.

“Necro! Impact Reflection!”

He had his pet use a skill that let him do damage when he blocked with his shield. The more the treant attacked, the worse things were for it.

“Shield Attack! Good! Necro, Polter Blaster!”

Seeing the treant stagger, he had Necro transform again.

This time Chrome’s cleaver grew to longsword length, and blue flames erupted from his armor.

“Necro, Stamina Syphon!”

Necro added another recovery skill to Chrome’s existing array.

Attacks with his short sword in this form meant double the health back. If he cast fear aside and kept hitting, his HP barely dropped.

“And the big finish!”

One last swing of his longsword cut deep into the bark, and the treant toppled over. The monster location buff kicked in, and he opened his map.

“Good, now I can see where they are. Oof, Maple’s still at it. If she ain’t moving, she must have a plan, but...lord knows what.”

He had no idea Maple had brought hell to earth, but some things you were better off not knowing.

“Okay, Necro, time to rack it up. This is on you, ’cause I don’t do enough damage on my own. Taunt!”

Chrome’s skill made several monsters run at them. Smaller treants reaching branches his way, butterflies dusting scales that applied status effects, and packs of goblins leaping out of the brush.

“Necro, Spectral Charge!”

This command made blue flames spurt from the blade of the longsword. Watching these flames grow steadily higher, he kept his shield out, deflecting attacks. He held his ground awhile, and a particularly strong flame gushed from his blade.

“Necro, Burst Flame!”

The longer he charged, the greater the power. Blue flames rocketed forward, doing huge damage to all the monsters. And applying the burn effect did more damage over time—an instant advantage. Now he just needed to polish off the remaining HP one at a time.

“Whew, that really helps. Makes getting surrounded that much easier.”

With Necro by his side, Chrome’s solo efforts were noticeably more effective. He’d felt as much when he borrowed Syrup, but having your own tamed monster made all the difference.

“If I’m gonna rank, we gotta keep at it. Given that explosion, Iz’ll be fine, so I don’t wanna be the only one out.”

The others all spent a lot of time petting their monsters. Chrome’s version of that was to thump his armor appreciatively. Then he opened his map and hustled to the next pack of monsters.



Maple Tree’s members were all steadily racking up kills. Taming monsters had made a clear difference to each member’s fighting style. Kanade in particular made that obvious.

“They might be less effective, but I can use as many as I want.”

The cooldown on Mimic was pretty long, but Kanade’s pet was a

perfect match for him. No matter how many grimoires Sou used, if the source grimoires were still on Kanade's shelves, they'd be back on Sou's the next time the mirror slime copied him.

Since he was also trying to gauge the strengths of this power, Kanade mostly let Sou handle the fighting, hiding himself inside a robe up a tree or in the shadows.

Even if Sou did get hit, Kanade himself could safely step in and intervene.

"Looks like Sou's starting to run low on grimoires. Sou, Rest."

He'd sensed a player coming and put Sou back in his ring, partly to keep it secret.

When he saw who it was pushing through the brush, he winced.

"Ah-ha-ha, talk about bad luck."

It was Dread and Drag. One had a black-haired wolf, and the other, a stony golem. Two top-class players with monster partners—his odds of surviving weren't high.

"Oh, you're alone? Sorry, bud—but we ain't holding back."

"Oh, Kanade. Ha-ha! I like it."

"Yeah, this is stacked against me. Wood Wall!"

He made a wall of trees between him and their weapons, trying to run for it.

But just as he thought he was gaining on them...

"Earth!" Drag yelled. "Sand King!"

Kanade glanced back, and a burst of sand nulled his wooden barricade. Dread and his wolf came charging through.

"Firestorm! Tornado!"

"Umbra! Shadow Dive!"

Kanade sent swirling fires and winds, but the wolf's black fur grew darker still, and both it and its owner slipped into the ground. They were only down a second, but that was enough to pass below the oncoming spells.

"Superspeed!"

"Mother Nature!"

"Earth, Ground Control!"

Dread lunged forward. Kanade threw out one of Syrup's skills, but it whiffed.

"Har! Ground Splitter!"

"Shadow Clone!"

Figuring he couldn't well afford to stand still, Kanade used a skill to split himself...

To no avail.

"Umbra, Shadow Pack!"

The ground at Umbra's feet spit out a pack of wolves, far outnumbering Kanade's clones—which were torn apart in seconds.

The real Kanade was immobilized by Drag's Ground Splitter and soon fell prey to Dread's daggers.

"Triple Slash!"

Since the mage had raised neither HP nor defense, he stood no chance—and burst into light.

Certain they'd won, Dread and Drag lowered their weapons.

"All right. Maple Tree are a core rival—this'll help us get to the medal-rich field."

"...That was a bit *too* easy. I bet he had more skills up his sleeve."

"He probably does. But no use thinking about it here. You saw the death particles."

"True—and if we don't stay focused on the monster hunt, our rank'll drop. Can't spend too long on players."

There wasn't really all that much value in PKing. Total monsters slain was a way bigger factor. They soon moved on.

And a minute later, a robed player—Kanade—came back.

"Whew, that was close. Can't take them head-on. Good work, Sou."

He parted the nearby brushes and pulled Sou out—it was back in slime form, half-size.

"Using Divide, then Mimic, let us get away scot-free."

The instant the wood wall went up, Kanade had used a grimoire to turn invisible, called Sou out, and traded places. Divide had then created a fake Sou to handle the fight.

The fake couldn't go far from the real body, so there was a solid chance they'd be discovered—but luck had been with them.

"I've seen their tamed monsters, so I'm not leaving empty-handed. But they're pretty strong. Gotta consult Sally on that later."

Even that brief battle had proved both Dread's wolf, Umbra, and Drag's golem, Earth, had some tricky skills. Sou's spells would have done solid damage if they'd hit and had pretty wide hit ranges. He'd let it use defensive skills that Maple and Sally relied on, and they hadn't even slowed that duo down. If they didn't figure out a plan, these two could be a real threat in the future.

"Let's hope we find monsters next."

Kanade put half-size Sou on his head and headed back to the hunt.



This map had a ton of players on it, and it was a serious challenge to find an unoccupied area. Steadily racking up the kills and staying alive, three players met in a misty wood.

They'd all killed their share and were looking to spend some time in a less populated area. Ordinarily, a place like this—with such poor

visibility—would mean a high risk of ambush, and not many would voluntarily hunt there. All three had planned to take advantage of that.

“This should work.”

“Cool. So nice to run into fellow guild members.”

Numbers provided a clear advantage. They might not be able to party up, but they knew each other and could coordinate their moves.

“That it is. Don’t you agr—? Mm?”

“What’s wrong? Wait...”

There had been three of them when they came in—but now there were only two. Why would someone leave without a word? They split up and searched the area but found no trace of their comrade.

“Yo, he’s totally vanished... You’re kidding?!”

In that brief interval, his remaining companion had vanished, and the sole remaining man was starting to panic.

“What the hell...?!”

Two red lights appeared through the mist—and the moment he glimpsed them, he was paralyzed.

“Shit! I’m done for...!”

Certain death was coming, he desperately tried to move—but that wouldn’t be possible as long as the status effect was active. The mists parted, and a giant white snake appeared. The man braced himself, but the impact—came from behind.

“Gleam.”

A katana swung in a horizontal slash, sinking deep into his back and emptying his HP.

When she saw him go down, Kasumi moved to Haku’s side and vaulted onto the snake’s head.

“Monsters are still spawning. Let’s head there.”

Haku slithered off through the trees, patrolling the forest. Kasumi’s snake was generating the mist itself.

“Whew...Haku, you sure have grown. You’re a valuable companion.”

As it leveled, Haku had acquired a skill called Supergiant—a variant of Syrup’s Giganticize.

Kasumi had used that and the mist-creation skill to turn a wide area into their very own hunting grounds.

Whenever players ventured in, she used Haku’s powers to paralyze them, then cut them down. Same for any monsters. The two of them just kept circling the forest, slaughtering everything.

And since Haku was carrying her around, she was taking it easy.

After a while, they found a five-yard-long boar—the largest monsters that spawned here—and three players fighting it. As the prelims wore on, more and more players were using the message

function to meet up with nearby guild members.

“More for us. Go on, Haku!”

Kasumi had her snake speed forward, intent on claiming both boar and players. It charged in from the side and bit into the boar’s flank.

“Armored Arms! Blood Blade!”

Before anyone could react to her surprise appearance, Kasumi’s blade went to liquid form and slashed all three players. Before they could recover from the blow, she charged in. Her blade—and those floating beside her—each cleaved a player in two.

“Haku! Paralytoxin! Fourth Blade: Whirlwind!”

Kasumi turned back to the boar. Haku’s fangs immobilized it, and her combo struck its head.

Haku had not learned all that many skills. But its high stats and sheer size were formidable.

It wrapped itself around the boar, constricting—for more damage.

The three players had already weakened it, so it did not last long.

“Very good, that worked again. Oh, that buff tells us where nearby players are!”

Kasumi hopped back on Haku’s head and started toward the nearest player icon. The more players she took out, the higher ranked the other Maple Tree members would be.

“Ha-ha, these woods belong to us. No one leaves here alive. Right, Haku?”

The snake slithered on through the woods—and not long after, more screams echoed through the mist.



Flame Empire’s subleader trio—Misery, Marx, and Shin—had successfully found each other, and the three of them were making quick work of every monster in sight. Since the map had been public ahead of time, they could have easily made contact and joined forces with Mii—but they’d chosen not to.

“We’re not technically a party.”

“Yep. And we’re not surviving if we get caught up in Mii’s AOEs.”

“She...doesn’t know the meaning of control...”

Mii was great at spells that incinerated everything around her, but in a format where friendly fire was on, she’d just turn her friends into crisps.

“Mii’ll be just fine on her own. Our job is to keep our own kill counts high. I’ll put them in the red, you finish ’em off.”

Before he found them, Shin had used his Splinter Sword and hawk, Wen, to take out a considerable number of monsters.

Meanwhile, Misery and Marx could attack if they had to, but they were very specialized in healing and trapping, respectively. They'd been far less efficient at monster hunting. As they made up for lost time, they encountered a tiger.

"I got this."

"We can back you up... Just...don't step on the traps."

"I can fight standing still. Just don't put 'em right under me. Here goes! Splinter Sword!"

Shin split his blade, sending the shards flying toward the tiger.

"Wen! Wind God!"

Powerful gales sprang up around the hawk, forming blades of air that slashed the tiger.

Before the tiger could get anywhere near them, countless blades had sliced away at it, leaving it on the brink of death. No single slice hurt that bad, but between Shin and his pet, the sheer quantity was more than enough.

"Holy Lance!"

Misery finished it off, and they headed for the next prey.

"I always wonder...how you keep track of them all."

"You get used to it. Before I knew it, I had the hang of it."

"Is it that easy?"

"What's up with your monsters?" Shin asked. "Any updates since we last spoke?"

"Me? Clear can't do anything remarkable yet. Like any chameleon, it can disappear... Oh, now it can make me disappear, too."

"Belle is basically unchanged. It's certainly unusual."

"Still hasn't learned anything but passives? That is pretty unusual!"

Belle was Misery's long-haired white cat. It was learning a whole bunch of passive skills, each of which buffed a small area immediately around it. Improved healing, extra damage dealt—the works.

But that range was still so small that it wasn't exactly practical.

"I'm sure it's just a late bloomer. I'm taking good care of it."

"Let's head into that abandoned village. Those tend to have lots of players."

"Don't want them hitting us from behind... I'll drop traps as we go."

"Good plan! Big help."

They fought their way through the village, dispatching more monsters. Shin was right—there were a fair number of players—but no one who could challenge this trio.

But after hunting awhile, they heard a familiar voice.

"Mm-mm-mm-hmm-mm... Ack, Flame Empire!"

"Oh. Frederica."

It was the Order's mage, on her own, staff in hand, steadily backing away. A back-line player would definitely struggle against these three.

"Ah-ha-ha...Pain'll be pissed if I die here... Mind letting me go?"

Frederica made a stab at a diplomatic solution, but no rival guild would back off that easy.

"Get her!"

"Indeed."

"Mm..."

"Augh, why? Well, fine! Notes, Awaken!"

A little yellow bird hopped onto her head. She certainly hoped she could survive with the bare minimum of skills, but she had to get out of this no matter what.

"Wen, Wind God!"

"Notes, Round! Hah, Multi-Barrier!"

A ton of wind blades were followed by Shin's Splinter Sword, and Frederica threw up some barriers. The blades began shattering one after another—but Shin realized there were *far* more barriers than before.

"I'm no slouch on quantity," Frederica said. "Multi-Firebolt. Multi-Lightbolt."

Magic circles appeared, and a second later, Notes chirped—and the quantity of circles doubled.

"See? I'm sure it won't kill *you*, but..."

A barrage of fire and light pelted the three of them.

"We've got this."

"Yeah...we'll stop them."

Misery used magic barriers of her own, and Marx grew a stone wall, blocking the bolts. The clash of spells kicked up a dust cloud.

The trio braced for a follow-up, but Frederica had never meant to fight them and was gone before the air cleared.

"She ran for it?"

"I did not expect her to have as many projectiles as you, Shin."

"Yeah, worth watching out for...oh."

"Mm? What's wrong, Marx?"

"She stepped in one."

He'd placed traps all over this village—especially where people were likely to exit. Marx always knew right where to put traps, and Frederica had likely tripped one the instant she thought she was safe.

"Argh! Unh...just when I was sure I'd slipped away!"

Frederica had only fallen halfway into the pit before managing to make a magical platform under herself. She scrambled up the side.

"Such rotten luck... Gotta run before..."

She might have escaped once, but this village was dotted with Marx's traps. If they caught up, she was done for. Frederica had to find one of her Order teammates fast—and left the village as quickly as she could while taking every precaution against triggering more traps.



"Nobody's been eliminated yet, so they must be doing well. No clue why Maple's showing up on the map, though..."

There wasn't that much time left in the prelims, so Sally stopped to stretch. A lot of players had perished by now, so she wasn't running into many—which meant she could focus on monsters.

"I've got a decent kill count, so I oughtta be fine. Still...this was the perfect chance, but I never saw anyone fighting with a decent tamed monster."

Were there any players outside the Order and Flame Empire worth paying attention to? This event's format forced everyone to bring their A game and was a good place to gather info.

"Oh, Mii's on the map now! Not much time left, but guess I'll hunt my way over to her."

Sally started running Mii's way, making short work of any monsters in her way.

"Oboro, Binding Barrier! Quintuple Slash!"

If they couldn't move, they couldn't fight back—and she could hit 'em with her most lethal skills. This map was standard difficulty, and the foes had simplistic attack patterns and not particularly high HP—none of them stood a chance against Sally.

"Hokay, over there...yikes."

Mii and a bird on fire were incinerating monster and player alike.

"I figured she'd be pretty bonkers."

Fires raged here and there across the wasteland around Mii, signs of the fierce battles she'd waged.

"That must be Ignis. Maple made it sound worth scoping."

To ensure no players got the drop on her, Sally used her webs to scale a tree. It was hard to spot her from the ground, and she'd likely see anyone coming.

"Any more monsters or players incoming...mm?"

Sally blinked. She'd spotted a man in white armor—Pain.

"Wow, this could be good."

The masters of Flame Empire and the Order of the Holy Sword—the game's two top guilds. If she could see them fight—well, Sally was already grinning.

“I knew I was on the map, but for that to draw you out...”

Mii chugged an MP potion and was ready to battle.

“I’ve hunted more than enough monsters. My time is better spent ascertaining my opponent’s capabilities. Ray, Awaken.”

Pain’s ring glowed, and a baby dragon with silver scales appeared. It was the size of a large bird, and it folded its wings, settling on its master’s shoulder.

“Funny you should say that. I was just thinking I could use a change of pace.”

Mii called Ignis out and activated Flame Empress. Pain drew his sword.

That was all the signal either required.

“Pyre!”

“Holy Splendor!”

Flames erupted from Mii’s side, and Pain unleashed a torrent of light. Both attacks coursed across the wasteland.

“Ignis, Fastened Flames!”

“Ray, Palidragon’s Grace.”

Each buffed themselves, lunging forward. Mii seemed disinclined to keep her distance, using Flare Impetus to close in fast.

“Blue Fire! Detonate!”



“Holy Banishment! Sacred Light!”

Each exchange of blows was generating crazy particle effects, their skills canceling each other out. And every move used was such high damage it would finish any ordinary fight.

Each swing Pain took, Mii dodged, flinging spells back. But Pain never let one hit, deflecting into a counter.

“Ray, Giganticize. Palidragon Breath.”

“Ignis! Giganticize, Eternal Flame.”

Ray’s breath and Ignis’s fires burst between them, gouging the earth—but they proved evenly matched.

“An impressive monster.”

“Same to your dragon. But if you’re hiding its strength—I will burn it down.”

Mii had no plans to hold anything back. She topped up her MP and gave her bird an order.

“Ignis, Phoenix Ignition. Fire Unto Me.”

The first skill buffed Mii, then the second turned Ignis into a pure mass of fire—which enveloped Mii’s body and began rolling out across the ground in all directions.

“Interesting. Even I can’t dodge that. Ray, Sacred Guardian.”

“Go! Raging Inferno!”

Red-hot flames belched out around Mii, igniting everything in sight. The light alone was blinding, but no more than the light around Pain. The two skills clashed and detonated, wreaking untold havoc on the trees and flatlands around and kicking up a prodigious dust cloud.

When the air cleared, Mii remained unharmed—and Pain still stood, his armor blackened and his HP dented.

“Tch, I was hoping you’d show off one of Ray’s big moves, but you soaked it with damage reduction and the strength of your holy sword. No getting past you.”

“Ha-ha, I’m not here to hand out free intel.”

“You never planned to beat me, then...but you think I’ll just let you leave?”

“Just try and stop me...if you can.”

Pain raised his holy sword—

But before the second round began, there was a crack...and a tree toppled over.

Sensing something closing in, both turned toward it, a temporary truce—and dozens of lasers shot out of the forest.

“What.....?! Ray!”

“Tch, strategic retreat! Ignis!”

Both guild masters leaped aboard their pets, evacuating.

A moment later, a giant crocodile some ten yards long emerged

from the forest, toppling trees in its way. But the size wasn't nearly as remarkable as the lasers firing from its maw.

"...The spirit's left me, Pain. We'll fight again anon."

"That works for me. Seeing Raging Inferno is enough for one day."

The intruder was enough to make the masters abandon their battle without a victor.

And of course, Sally had been watching the whole time.

"Oh. That's...Maple."

There was still an icon indicating Maple's position, and it was now tearing across the map. On closer inspection, the crocodile wasn't shooting lasers; it just had a ball of wool wedged in its mouth—with lasers constantly shooting out of it.

"Keep running till the fat lady sings!"

Sally just barely heard Maple's cry and watched dead-eyed until she was out of sight.

As the prelim time limit approached, Maple grew bored with hitting flowers to lure in monster hordes. She'd run out of Hydra, Saturating Chaos, Pandemonium, and Lure of the Deep, so her monster-elimination speed had dropped, and now she just had teeth gnawing at her while she waited for Predators to gnaw them back.

"You know, I haven't really seen much of this map."

The prelim map was pretty large. It seemed unlikely something this big would only be used once, but there was no telling when she'd be able to explore it again.

"I guess I'll take a quick tour to wrap things up! I've probably killed enough monsters by now."

All she needed was a way to get around. There wasn't much time left, so it would have to be something fast. She put a hand to her chin, closed her eyes, and thought.

"Hmm... What to do...hmm?!"

She was being attacked by a *lot* of monsters and suddenly felt herself being lifted up. She quickly opened her eyes and found herself about to be swallowed by a crocodile far larger than any you'd see in real life.

It tipped its head back, ready to chew her up—but Maple's defense was far stronger than its teeth, so this didn't do anything. Annoyed at the interruption, she glanced around, wondering how she could get revenge.

"Oh, they're not letting me into the stomach. Aww."

She tried slapping the inner cheeks—and then wondered if a

creature this size could maybe move even faster than Atrocity.

“I wonder how I can make it go where I want?”

Letting it gnaw on her, she moved to the front of the jaw, poking her face out between its teeth. Perhaps it detected that face as a new target because even while still chewing on the rest of her, it began running in that direction.

“Nice! But if I go the other way...? Oh, it’s cooperating!”

She’d need to pin herself down so the mastication process didn’t steer them off course. She took some special Iz adhesive out of her inventory, used Wool Up, and spread the glue all over her fur and the croc’s mouth.

Now she wouldn’t get jostled around and could move where she pleased.

“Turn off Predators so they don’t accidentally beat it, ready some lasers in case I see other players...and we’re good to go!”

With her crocmobile ready, she dangled herself as bait, adjusted direction, and began her run. Almost immediately she discovered a fatal flaw in her plan.

“Oh no! I can’t see anything!”

One problem led to another. Maple no longer had any way of stopping the croc, so she just let it run while she sank into thought. After a minute, she opened her inventory and took out some video-recording crystals.

“Hang on... Hnggg, if I stretch... Done!”

She managed to plaster several crystals on the croc’s snout, recording everything it raced past. A brilliant idea, if she did say so herself.

“Oh, Mii’s on the map!” Maple cried. “Cool, let’s go there!”

By this time, many players had noticed Maple suddenly on the move and quickly tried to change direction—but without her ever knowing.

“Wait, I can’t actually stop... Oh well, it’s fast and can go anywhere.”

The crocodile had never been intended for use as transport, so some minor flaws could be overlooked.

And so Maple’s crocmobile bulldozed over any players who failed to bail in time—to anyone else, it was a legit threat—and ran circles around the map.

“Huh, it’s over already?”

It seemed far too soon, but she waited to be sent back to the main map. She felt like she was forgetting something but couldn’t remember what. As the light wrapped round her, she muttered, “I was just making the crocodile run...” Then she gasped. “The video! Augh, wait, wait!”

But she remembered too late and was teleported away before she could recover the crystals from the crocodile's nose.

851 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder
Prelims down.

852 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder
Gotta wait for results.
None of us died, so here's hoping.

853 Name: Anonymous Spear Master
Mad skillz.

854 Name: Anonymous Mage
Really shows how much these pets are helping.

855 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder
They're great. I've got one, and it's kept me from dying so many times.

856 Name: Anonymous Archer
The best are still the best even without.
But they sure make solo play more viable.

857 Name: Anonymous Spear Master
Several chunks of that event map became no-man's-lands.
Like no one sane would venture near.

858 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder
I hear our members were behind several of those.

859 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder
I'll bet.
Maple was on the map the whole time so everyone hardcore ignored her.
I sure did.

860 Name: Anonymous Spear Master
I took a look but definitely an only-the-chosen deal.
No mortal man would survive.

861 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder
I saw regular pillars of fire going up and was like, yikes.
I can't do that shit.

862 Name: Anonymous Mage

Please don't ever.
Turning half of creation into hell is not normal.

863 Name: Anonymous Archer
You be you.
You're good the way you are.

864 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder
But why was Proximity Death Maple on the map the whole time?

865 Name: Anonymous Spear Master
She was using herself as bait to lure in monsters.
Hordes of them running out of the woods and dying en masse, total horror show.

866 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder
Maple was bait the entire event, then.

867 Name: Anonymous Mage
What do you mean?

868 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder
Maple found this goddamn huge crocodile, climbed in the mouth, and did laps around the field.
She took video but forgot to collect, was real sad.

869 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder
How does that even happen?

870 Name: Anonymous Spear Master
I can't even picture it.
It's beyond comprehension.

871 Name: Anonymous Archer
Are we sure she's playing the same game? Clearly her goals are not aligned with ours.

872 Name: Anonymous Mage
I got run over by that. I was still going, why is there a laser-beam crocodile...?
Why would a croc have lasers? Why not just chomp people?

873 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder
She's just getting worse.
She's had a pet monster for ages, so god knows how many skills it has.

874 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder
Syrup's still growing.
Apparently we'll get to see more during the main event.

875 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder
It's still going?
Are there no limits?

876 Name: Anonymous Mage
Can't decide if I'm scared or looking forward to it.

877 Name: Anonymous Archer
Definitely scared. I mean, I haven't adjusted to her usual chaos.

878 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder
It ain't something you just adapt to.
I thought I was, then she came back with tentacles and freaked my shit out.

And so the prelims ended and all players awaited the results.



With the rush of the live event over, the admin room settled in to the process of tabulating the rankings. The top names were all very familiar to them.

“No real curveballs, huh?”

“The strong factions all tamed stronger monsters, so not surprising nothing made up the existing disparity. Maybe we could have incentivized PvP a little more?”

“Yeah, let's look at that next time.”

A few points of concern were raised, but mostly they were just plugging away. Once they got the bulk of the work done, it was time to check out the feeds.

“...Did we implement any area bosses?”

“No...I mean, there were some stronger enemies, but nothing you'd straight up call a boss.”

“I bet some players would call these one.”

“Quite a few fell victim to them.”

Mii's inferno, Pain's light streams, Iz's explosions, Kasumi's forest of mist, and Maple's indescribable apocalypse...

Any one of them would qualify as a boss.

“Looks like the landscape matched their fighting styles, and the rules fed into that. Good stuff!”

“Like hell it is!”

“Let’s go one at a time. Leave the good; fix the bad.”

Everyone agreed it was best to start with the most volatile. Maple’s feed went on-screen. She had a bunch of overlapping skills obliterating the plain, with her camping out in the middle.

“That flower... Oh, I get it.”

“Even if the players know where she is, no one’s going to her. It just turned into a monster lure.”

“It’s not! That’s not what it’s for!”

“I know; I feel ya.”

“This is all ’cause she figured out what it did in the jungle.”

They let the video play awhile, and when they got to the bit with the crocodile mouth, the entire room screamed.

“Why’d she just go in so calmly?”

“Good thing I deleted the stomach. She’d have blown it up from the inside.”

“No more monsters you can climb into.”

The octopus had been the last straw, but they all nodded, certain they’d made the right fix. Ten seconds later, the crocodile betrayed them all and became a vehicle.

“Why wouldn’t she just climb out?!”

“Don’t ask me! I mean, sure, it goes fast! It’s a fun idea!”

“We should have made the teeth do piercing damage...”

They went through the rest of the players, excitedly arguing about this or that, checking everything out.

“Are the main event’s monsters gonna cut it?”

“I hope they don’t just mop the floor with them. This time they’ll be attacking in parties!”

“It’s the monsters who attack, right?”

“The players are basically bosses at this point, so it’s hard to tell which side is which.”

“You can say that again.”

“Glad we split this by difficulty.”

Pet teamwork was certainly powerful. But that meant the monsters had to be worthy. Everyone looked over the data for the main event’s foes, excitement and nerves mingling in their eyes.



As they’d hoped, all members of Maple Tree made it to the top of the rankings.

The guild’s goal had been to tackle the highest difficulty with all members, and that would now be possible.

Since they could form parties this time, they’d all get to show off

their new pets.

“Same map as the prelims. Good news, Maple. There’ll be medals out there, so we can scour the map for ‘em.”

“I like fighting, too, but you see such pretty things when you’re exploring!”

She might have forgotten to collect her recording crystals, but knowing they were going right back helped ease the pain.

“But I’m glad everyone made it.”

“Tsukimi worked so hard!”

“So did Yukimi!”

The twins were each clutching their bear cubs tight, which made everyone else smile. Mai and Yui had been scared they wouldn’t last long, so everyone was thrilled they had.

“The tamed monsters really make a difference and helped out—but the game’s gonna get harder as a result,” Sally said.

Chrome and Kasumi nodded.

“Looks like the top players all have good pets. Having pets of our own doesn’t mean things’ll be easy.”

“And if we don’t keep them leveled, we’ll fall behind.”

“Right! We’ve gotta keep grinding! I wanna see how strong Syrup gets!”

The main event was a few days away, but no one could wait. They were all eager to demonstrate how cool their pets were.

Everyone loved to show off.

“Oh, by the way—I caught a glimpse of Dread’s and Drag’s pets during the prelim.”

Kanade told them about Dread’s shadow-wielding wolf and Drag’s sand-and-ground-controlling golem.

“Ugh...if they can cancel Mother Nature, that’s not good.”

Syrup had a number of skills that involved the ground, and if none of them worked, she was in trouble.

“Dread’s a threat, too. He’s likely invulnerable while he’s in that shadow, so if we throw out big moves without thinking, we’ll whiff.”

“Hmm. Well, we won’t be PvPing until at least the next event—but worth gathering all the info we can.”

Kanade’s Order info wasn’t all they’d gained—Sally had watched Mii and Pain throw down (until Maple barged in).

Mii had already gone exploring with Maple, so most of her info was Pain related.

At the very least, she’d learned he could fly and had an AOE breath attack. And a monster that no one else had even sighted. Given the rarity, odds were high it had some extremely powerful skills still up its sleeve.

“Unfortunately, all I can say there is...look out! Basically, all

dragons have a breath attack, and given his advice to Frederica, he's big on secrets. Mii's Raging Inferno was bonkers strong, too. Covered a huge area and probably just as high damage. An AOE that size, even I couldn't get out in time."

All their main rivals had pets now, and this would give their attacks that much more variety.

"Okay, then let's do well on this next event, get lots of medals, and make ourselves even stronger! We've gotta keep this few but *fine* thing going!"

"Yep. We all gotta be powerhouses."

Everyone nodded and set about making their pets stronger for the upcoming event.



Hello to anyone who just happened to pick up Volume 8. Thank you to anyone who's been buying the series all along. My name is Yuumikan.

Between Volumes 7 and 8, something very huge happened—there's gonna be an anime!

As exciting as that is, it should air in 2020, so you'll have to wait awhile yet. Since this doesn't happen every day, I went to watch them recording. How do I put it—it's the strangest feeling watching each character get a voice. I watched them poring over every nuance and detail, making a full episode, and it felt so unreal. All I knew was I'd witnessed something amazing. And I had that experience because you all read my work and supported the series. I can't thank you enough.

As for the anime itself, naturally, I'm pleased for the chance to bring the series to all kinds of new people, but more than that, I hope it thrills everyone who's been enjoying the series all along. Not to repeat myself, but I've only made it this far because of you.

And that is also true for the anime! That's all I can really say at this stage, but watching professionals do their thing is always something else. I'm sure the results will be a delight!

Also, I don't do Twitter or anything, so I'm the last person to relay any messaging. There's an official anime Twitter and website, so if you're interested, follow them!

They're also going to be making a game. Things just keep getting bigger and bigger, and it's exciting but also scary. But I intend to enjoy it all as best I can! The game also has an official Twitter and site, so I think you can learn more there. And they have voice-acting samples! I hope the voices match your expectations. And I hope I have fun playing once it comes out!

That's about all for *I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense*, Vol. 8.

New stories await in the anime and game.

And I am to keep writing the novels.

So I'd be glad if you'd follow me there.
I hope we meet again in Volume 9 someday!

Yuumikan

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